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**The Turning Point of Who Shall Be Master: *Killer of Sheep*, Naming, Gender, and the Gaze
of African American Women**

A Thesis

Presented to

The Academic Faculty

By

Sean Watkins

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

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**The Turning Point of Who Shall Be Master: *Killer of Sheep*, Naming, Gender, and the Gaze
of African American Women**

Hollywood and the Black Community*

We must tell both white and black movie producers that we will not tolerate the continued warping of our black children's minds with the filth, violence, and cultural lies that are all-pervasive in current productions of so-called black movies.

We must tell black and white producers that the transformation from the stereotyped Step n' Fetch to super nigger on the screen is just another form of cultural genocide.

We must tell white and black movie producers that we will not tolerate the continued portrayal of black women on the screen as either house servants or women of loose morals who climb in and out of bed without any emotional involvement.

We must insist that our children are not constantly exposed to a steady diet of so-called black movies that glorify black males as pimps, dope pushers, gangsters and super males with vast physical prowess but no cognitive skills.

We must insist that black newspapers, radio stations and magazines receive a fair share of movie advertising.

We must insist that movie studios and movie distributors hire blacks in meaningful positions and that black promotion agencies and other related black businesses be retained to handle all aspects of movies distributed and shown in black communities.

We must insist that black directors, actors, and actresses be sensitive to the hopes and aspirations of the black community from whence they came and the community from which they seek continued support.

Junius Griffin 1972

Former head of the Los Angeles NAACP and former film publicist

Part One: Introduction

Blaxploitation ended almost as abruptly as it began, but its mark still lingers.¹ Junius Griffin, former film publicist and NAACP activist, issued several declarations in his 1972 speech against Blaxploitation. Griffin's sentiments against the black film genre that had swept the country during the 1970s is echoed in the works of filmmakers who emerged from the UCLA film school, a group known as the LA Rebellion, whose unofficial consensus tended to be both anti-Hollywood and anti-Blaxploitation. The group of student filmmakers, which included Charles Burnett, Larry Clark, Julie Dash, Haile Gerima, Walter Gordon (Jamaa Faraka), and Billy Woodbury, desired to produce socially conscious films that would hold up to time, and not Hollywood movies. The group, also referred to as the LA School, worked closely together on one another's projects during graduate school, pitching in on production and brainstorming. A product of this collaboration was a 40-minute short titled *Several Friends* (1969), which laid the groundwork and much of the character creation for *Killer of Sheep*. The film won many awards, including the Critic's Award in the Berlin International Film Festival in 1981, and it was one of the first 50 films in history declared a national treasure by the Library of Congress, which it placed into the National Film Registry by 1990.² Despite its quiet success, *Killer of Sheep* is a relatively unknown masterpiece that uses a bouquet of film and musical elements to signify that

¹ Ed Guerrero, "The So-Called Fall of Blaxploitation." *The Velvet Light Trap* 64, no. 1 (2009): 90-91, accessed October 10, 2015, doi:10.1353/vlt.0.0055. Guerrero states, "Certainly, by the mid-seventies the black cinema interlude (in Hollywood's parlance, a short term for quick profit, subgenre cycle), universally known as Blaxploitation, had reached its zenith in terms of popularity and number of films. From there, Blaxploitation went brain dead and was subsequently euthanized" p, 90

² "Killer of Sheep - A Film by Charles Burnett - About the Film," *Killerofsheep.com* (2007), accessed November 12, 2015, <http://www.killerofsheep.com/about.html>.

black people were more than what the cheap Hollywood exploitation films suggested: pimps, prostitutes, drug dealers and violent sex maniacs, and at times, all of these combined.

Burnett's 1977 film was a direct reaction against the Blaxploitation genre's perpetuation of socially destructive stereotypes of the black family and community as a whole. Blaxploitation was at its best, a "discursive, cultural compost," which, according to Ed Guerrero sated a need in the 1960s for black audiences who wanted to see black actors as the heroes of a film. Writers like Addison Gayle, like Griffin, Jesse Jackson, SCLC, and CORE, understood that the social damage caused by Blaxploitation was a prime example of irresponsibility by black filmmakers to portray their own communities in a manner that would benefit anyone culturally.³ Gayle described Blaxploitation as a nihilism in which black filmmakers took the freedom of artistry and a changing racial climate and, "pushed (it) to its most ridiculous limits; here are writers and actors who claim that freedom for the artist entails exploitation of the very people to whom they owe their artistic existence".⁴

Having grown up in the Watts area of Los Angeles, Burnett witnessed this exploitation, and he wanted to use his freedom, his thesis, to create a space to showcase average, middle-class, urban families and their day-to-day survival experiences. Unlike popular Blaxploitation films that perpetuated stereotypes, Burnett stated that there was normalcy to blackness, there was vulnerability and tenderness to black men, and that blacks should not be perceived as static figures of criminality and negative stereotypes. Moreover, just as much as his film reacted

³ Ed Guerrero, "The So-Called Fall of Blaxploitation." *The Velvet Light Trap* 64, no. 1 (2009): 90-91, accessed October 10, 2015, doi:10.1353/vlt.0.0055.

⁴ Addison Gayle, "Aesthetic Defender," *Black World/ Negro Digest* 24, no. 2. (December 1974): 40, accessed August 12, 2015, <https://books.google.com/books?id=sbIDAAAAMBAJ&lpg=PA1&pg=PA1#v=twopage&q&f=false>.

against Blaxploitation, Burnett had a specific, intended audience. Albeit convoluted, Burnett's audience was one that specifically excluded the population of young people who were drawn to Blaxploitation films, and instead sought attention in cultural scholarship arenas (not poor, uneducated, *normal* people like himself). Burnett unwittingly created a film which would not only touch those he sought out, but also the people consuming Blaxploitation films and equally those in situations such as his and his protagonist. His film relayed to the unintended crowd that there was a different depiction of their lives available, one that resembled reality and brought representation of blackness away from white fantasy and black spectacle (to the extreme).

Despite being hailed for this effort, *Killer of Sheep* has gone relatively unnoticed outside of academic attention and elite circles, possibly beyond the reach of the very average-man viewer to which it wanted to convey its message. However, Burnett intended his film to be only marginally accessible as reflected by his comment that, "I'm not trying to be sophisticated, but my movies are not designed for 18-year-olds".⁵ The filmmaker was referring to the audience who sought high-action, commercial movies such as Gordon Parks Jr.'s *Superfly* and D'Urville Martin's *Dolemite*. Burnett intended his film to be a discussion-launching piece and, as such, was not focused on creating an entertaining theatrical contender against other films coming out in 1977 and 1978 like *Jaws*, *Star Wars*, *The Wiz*, and *Grease*. These have their own respective merits but do not foster the same type of cultural discourse and examination that *Killer of Sheep* did as an 80-minute student film.

⁵ Victor Vazquez, "Killer of Sheep," Milestone Films & Videos, 2007. Accessed August 15, 2015. <http://www.killerofsheep.com/images/KOSfinalPK.pdf>.

Scholarly discussion of *Killer of Sheep* has focused on a broad range of ideas, such as music, philosophical ponderings, and neo-realism, comparing Burnett's work to that of legendary Italian filmmakers Roberto Rossellini and Vittorio De Sica. Burnett, himself influenced by his own professors, Basil Wright (*Song of Ceylon*) and Elyseo Taylor, and famous filmmakers such as Sydney Lumet and Federico Fellini, is acclaimed for his mastery of neo-realism. Film critic Michael Tolkin stated that, "[*Killer of Sheep*] is formally one of the most interesting narrative films ever, since it suggests that poverty deprives people of a third act. If it were an Italian film from 1953, we would have every scene memorized."⁶ In *Senses of Cinema*, Nelson Kim compares Charles Burnett to masters such as Robert Altman (*Nashville*), Yasujirō Ozu (*Tokyo Story*), and Iosif Kheifits (*The Lady with the Dog*), stating that the manner in which Burnett informed his characters paralleled that of the Italian neorealists after WWII, and that Burnett was "a one man African-American New Wave" because *Killer of Sheep* "gave a culture, a people, a nation new images of themselves."⁷

The previous statements of praise contrast sharply with *Killer of Sheep*'s single film review from its release and its relative underappreciation thereafter. Burnett's first public screening of *Killer of Sheep* took place at Howard University, followed by a one-week previewing at the Whitney Museum. Burnett's piece was screened by the press for reviews while running at the Whitney, with only two reporters attending: *New York Times*' Janet Maslin and J. Hoberman of *The Village Voice*.⁸ Hoberman writes that at the time of his review, he had already dedicated his 750-word section to an event put on by internationally-renowned filmmaker Miklós

⁶ Nelson Kim, "Great Directors: Charles Burnett," *Senses of Cinema* no. 26 (May 2003), accessed April 20, 2015, <http://sensesofcinema.com/2003/great-directors/burnett/>.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Hoberman, J. "Once Upon A Time" *Film Comment* 49, no. 5 (September- October 2013): 36-41, accessed September 8, 2015. General OneFile, EBSCOhost.

Jancsó. Due to the conflict, Hoberman submitted Burnett's film as the leading "Voice Choice" piece.⁹ The decision not to run *Killer of Sheep*'s review is one that Hoberman says, "I came to regret when the movie's lone review turned out to be a bored pan by *New York Times* second string critic Janet Maslin."¹⁰ In Maslin's scathing review, she wrote that the film was a perfect example to "make one mindful of the difference between genuinely abstract art and iciness for its own sake." Despite what Burnett believed his film to be about, his film had "just enough of a story to make it taxing", and she believed Burnett to have an "arty detachment from his material".¹¹ Virtually no other critic agrees with her statements about the film.¹² Burnett intentionally created a piece of work that appeared amateur and gritty, and having come up in Watts and South Central L.A., he was more than intimate with his context and subject according to Ann Hornaday of *The Washington Post*.¹³

Contemporary scholarship and critique of *Killer of Sheep* lean towards designating the film a masterpiece and Burnett a cinematic genius. Often compared to Italian neorealist films, Burnett's work is said by many critics, such as Ntongela Masilela, to not only have single-handedly restored the representation of blackness to film, but to have transcended neorealism into an almost neo-neorealism. He created work that displayed the dissonance of history and present day "impl[ying] a definite ideological statement that was largely absent from neo-realism" because it "renegotiated the representation of the black figure on screen" in a reality and

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Janet Maslin, "Killer of Sheep (1977) Screen: 'Killer of Sheep' Is Shown At the Whitney: Nonprofessional Cast," *New York Times*, November 14, 1978, accessed August 28, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/movie/review?res=980DE6D61631E432A25757C1A9679D946990D6CF>.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ann Hornaday, "Out of the Shadows," *The Washington Post*, June 7, 2007, accessed January 23, 2016, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/06/01/AR2007060100469.html>.

not fiction like Blaxploitation had.¹⁴ Taking on the appearance of both neorealism and cinema vérité, or a documentary-style of filming, Burnett juxtaposed natural light and deep shadows with his use of 16mm, black and white film. The unnatural pairing of animal butchering and the main character's life is accomplished with the use of strategic placement of music throughout the film. A goal of Burnett was to encapsulate the records of his past, to preserve them for others as his mother did for him. The filmmaker wanted to create work that reflected his own life and that of everyone he knew. Despite the easy comparability of Burnett's life and Stan's life, J. Hoberman believes that even if comparing David Lynch's *Eraserhead* (the better filmmaker) to *Killer of Sheep*, *Sheep* returns as the better film. *Killer of Sheep* took the film world by surprise in 2002 by appearing in The National Society of Film Critic's *The 'A' List* of 100 essential films, when the almost unheard of film was listed among films like *Raging Bull*, *Schindler's List*, *Annie Hall*, and *Citizen Kane*.¹⁵ *Killer of Sheep* is now included in the film canon of masterpieces and Charles Burnett is considered one of the least known film geniuses of all time.

On the surface, *Killer of Sheep* is a simple and near irreverent film about a few days in the life of an average working-class African American man named Stan who lives in post-conflict Watts, Los Angeles. This film is anything but simple, though, as it contains complex cues for retrospection and dialogue throughout. Through several short vignettes, *Killer of Sheep* provides glimpses into an average black man's life, a life filled with sadness and perseverance in post-uprising Watts over the course of about a week. Stan, the central character of the film, is a sharp contrast to other black male characters of 1970s black films, which according to Junius

¹⁴ Chris Norton, "Black Independent Cinema and the Influence of Neo-Realism: Futility, Struggle and Hope In The Face of Reality," Imagesjournal.Com. February 24, 2004, accessed October 12, 2015, <http://www.imagesjournal.com/issue05/features/black3.htm>.

¹⁵ Hoberman, J. "Once Upon A Time" *Film Comment* 49, no. 5 (September- October 2013): 36-41, accessed September 8, 2015. General OneFile, EBSCOhost.

Griffin, “constantly exposed (black children) to a steady diet of so-called black movies that glorify black males as pimps, dope pushers, gangsters and super males with vast physical prowess but no cognitive skills.”¹⁶ Griffin stated that the Blaxploitation type-turned-stereotypes, were “warping our black children’s minds” and a “form of cultural genocide.”¹⁷ In contrast to the negative tropes, Stan is a father and husband who works in a sheep and lamb slaughterhouse out of economic necessity.¹⁸ An intended conversation piece, Burnett’s film comments restlessly on creating authentic versions of blackness in film that are a far cry from the flashy, sexuality-driven realm of the Blaxploitation genre against which it rebels. Burnett not only humanizes black men and their families, but also implies a conversation about the neglected voice of black women in film who share in the struggle of blackness in America. *Killer of Sheep* is an overture of post-exploitative lives for people whose lives are conceived and conserved in the very margins of society that political and academic discourse had promised a deliverance from through acts such as emancipation from slavery, civil rights activism, and legislation such as the civil rights act of 1964. Burnett’s film, while portrayed by melanin gifted, black actors, is actually the tale of every man who longs for more than what “this bitter Earth” has bestowed on him, and how perhaps despite the blues of his given scenario he is able to keep his head above water and to tread a little bit longer through his hopelessness and by doing so, may be how he wins. His perseverance is his achievement and his blues, his theme song because with these things any man has the gift of seeing value in his hope.

¹⁶ Junius Griffin, “Hollywood and the Black Community,” *The Crisis* 80. no. 5 (May 1973): 171, accessed November 9, 2015, https://books.google.com/books?id=hS32M_i-FSQC&lpg=PP1&pg=PP1#v=thumbnail&q&f=false

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Shows that black fathers exist contrary to the infamous 1965 Moynihan Report (Report can be visited at <http://www.dol.gov/oasam/programs/history/webid-meynihan.htm>)

The flip side to this, however, is the silence of women in this film. Their hope is wrapped up in their identities as stereotypes, and thus concealed and perverted into hope not for themselves or their personal desires, but for that of others (men, children, and their entire race), as nurturers. Ultimately the presentation of woman as nurturers equates to the presentation of women as selfless, but this selflessness is accomplished by self-neglect through the veil of other people's happiness.

There have been no formal or informal statements on gender and *Killer of Sheep*, whether to bolster Burnett's accomplishment of having advanced black men beyond Blaxploitation's stereotypes or the unequal treatment of black women in this film and its predecessors such as *Gone with the Wind* and *Foxy Brown*. While *Killer of Sheep* holds a mirror up to 1970s America, exploring and exposing gender and race issues, Burnett, intentionally or not, effectively demonstrates the lack of recognition that women faced in domestic, activist, and employment spheres; simultaneously, Burnett conspicuously reifies the relegation of women into that silent and domestic sphere while challenging stereotypes of black men, elevating them, and establishing them as humans, capable of hubris, humanity, and vulnerability.

This film, despite its masterful accomplishment of rebirthing black male identity in American film via Italian neo-realism, neglected to uplift the characterization of black women from roles which far preceded Blaxploitation. Thus, *Killer of Sheep* may be said to have served the patriarchal ego to humanize black men, all the while unintentionally leaving black woman in positions of invisibility, as stereotypical mammies, nags, and hysterical objects for the consumption of the male gaze. This film created authentic spaces for blackness in natural settings and was the first of its kind to do so, but the overall message was meant to be universal

to all people and as a universal film, spoke to the invisibility of authentic spaces of power for women in film. In order to read the film through these gendered, racial, and socio-economic lenses, I will summarize *Killer of Sheep*, discuss Blaxploitation, the genre to which *Killer of Sheep* was responding, briefly touch on the film's history, and investigate African American identity, along with tropes and types contained therein. I will also necessarily contextualize the film with discussions about the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements, as well as gender, feminism, and oppression. Ultimately, I will demonstrate that *Killer of Sheep* normalized the everyday black American man, but in doing so, reaffirmed the voiceless and subordinated position of black American women.

Part Two: Detailed summary of the film

The film begins with the title, *Killer of Sheep*, cutting to a black screen as Paul Robeson's "Deep River, Curly-headed Baby," which is sung by a woman and children, plays into the lecturing of a boy by his father because the boy did not help his younger brother, Henry, in a fight. The father tells the son that he needs to wake up and realize that he is almost a man and that life is teaching him valuable lessons now. The mother walks over, gaining the boy's gaze, and slaps him in the face without saying a word.



Figure 1

The second vignette captures the neighborhood boys at play in the Southern Pacific railyard in the shadows of factories and amongst debris and dirt as they throw rocks at one another and wrestle. The first face shown is a slender boy who is the son of the lead character Stan. A large group of boys sits along the railroad tracks, bored and throwing stones at signs, while others discuss going to the Vicksburg to watch prostitutes going in and out of the hotel. A boy replies to the general invitation that he would not dare go to the Vicksburg because his

mother would be upset with him. Stan Jr. heads home and on the way, comes across two men hopping a fence, robbing someone of their television set. The boy spots an older man across the alley who is watering his yard while watching the men, and becomes their lookout as he informs the men that the older man has gone to phone the police.

The third vignette opens to Stan on his knees working under the sink as his friend stands near him talking. Stan confides in his friend that, "I'm working myself into my own hell, I close my eyes, can't get no sleep at night. No peace of mind." Stan Jr. arrives home to search for his b.b. gun, and unsuccessful in locating it, makes a bee-line to his sister Angela, and when he does not get the answer he desires, he grabs the girl's face through the mask she is wearing before fleeing out of the door and crossing paths with his father's friends.



Figure 2

Two of Stan's friends leave and his friend Bracy remains. Angela is beckoned outside by a whistling friend. The men sit at a small table, Stan offers Bracy a cup of coffee or tea, and the conversation is guided by Stan as he holds his teacup close to his cheek. He asks Bracy if the tea warmth on his cheek reminded him of the gentle breath of a woman, to which his friend replies that he does not date women "with malaria" and laughs away Stan's question. Stan visibly gives up on the conversation as Bracy begins talking about the other friends and himself hanging out late at night and not stopping by Stan's house and how Stan's wife must have him "towing the cart" at home. Stan replies that he is always awake and that they could have stopped by. Soon the sound of dogs barking in the background and whistling precedes the figure of his wife in the doorway with a disapproving look on her face. Bracy winks at her, Stan looks up from his checkers, and she walks off. Stan tells Bracy that it is time for him to get ready for work.



Figure 3

The fourth vignette shows Stan bent over in almost the same form he held at home when he was tending to the floor and sink, as he bends over to spray animal remnants from the floor and sinks of the slaughterhouse to the backdrop of “Afro-American Symphony No.1” by William Grant Still. The sound of children singing “This Old Man” accompanies a wide shot of the Solano Meat Company. At home, Stan’s wife prepares for his arrival by pruning her appearance and making dinner before looking in on Angela who is singing and playing in a room with a doll as she sings Earth, Wind, and Fire’s song, “Reasons”.

In the fifth vignette, Stan arrives home and sits blankly at the dinner table with his family, where he does not eat his food and fails to respond to his family. Stan’s wife, who has no name in the film, states to him that, *“You never smile anymore. I used to think you was just tired but I think deep down inside you worried you aint happy. Don’t nothing ever make you want to smile”*. Stan does not reply, and the mother and Angela exchange glances several times as Angela looks from one parent to the other. Angela exits the room. Stan’s wife reaches across the table suggesting that they head to bed together and Stan rejects her again.



Figure 4



Figure 5

The sixth vignette shows the boys, once again at play, although this time they are jumping from high walls near the remnants of a building where the boys busy themselves at play. The sound of Paul Robeson singing “The House I Live In” plays until it is interrupted by the sound of sharpening butcher’s knives and a shot of goats and sheep being prodded up a ramp together as “All the Friends I Know” by Paul Robeson, closes the scene.

The seventh vignette shows Stan’s friends Scooter and Smoke arrive in front of Stan’s home in a new Cadillac, who try to convince Stan to aid them in committing a murder or at least let them borrow his gun. Stan replies that he does not own a weapon, which goes against what Blaxploitation films showed as the norm and does not want to involve himself with their plot. Stan’s wife steps outside to make herself seen, and when the men challenge Stan’s manhood and his inability to afford the things they have, she injects herself into their conversation. Her (improvised by the actress) argument attacks the false definitions that they have parleyed as truths. Smoke and Scooter leave. Stan Jr. calls his mother “Mot dear” and asks for money. Stan yells at the boy for using what he feels is a country term for his mother and the boy runs in the house as the mother looks as if she approved of the pet name.¹⁹

The eighth vignette shows a group of girls playing in an alley when the boy from the first vignette rides along on his bike, calls one of the girls a name, and the girls beat him up and tear apart his bike leaving him running home in tears. At home, Angela stands in the shadows listening to her father and his friends talk. Stan proclaims that he is not poor because he can afford to give things away and the men discuss spending their paychecks on an engine block for

¹⁹ As Phyllis Rauch Klotman notes, “Mot dear [short for mother dear, a term used in the country]”. Phyllis Rauch Klotman, *Screenplays of the African American Experience (Blacks in the Diaspora)* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 106.

an old vehicle they came across. Angela is spotted by her mother, who sits in a nearby window instructing her not to stand around listening to the men talk.



Figure 6



Figure 7

The ninth vignette follows Stan as he goes to cash his paycheck at a neighborhood liquor store. Outside, a group of drunk men and women listen to the radio in a windshield-less car. The store is run by a white woman named Jerri who shows an affection for Stan.

Once he and his friend Eugene leave the store, they go to Silbo's house to haggle for the car part. After lugging the heavy part down the stairs they place it onto the bed of the truck, which faces down a steep hill. Eugene pinches his finger and talks Stan out of pushing the engine all the way into the cargo of the truck and when they pull away, the engine goes crashing from the truck down to the street where it disintegrates and is rendered worthless. Angela, who had waited in the truck the whole time, stares at the abandoned part in the street as they drive away. Children fly overhead, jumping from building to building as Stan and Eugene arrive at Eugene's housing project. Below them, a crowd of mostly girls gathers on the steps to watch a man in his

Army uniform duck and weave in a stairway and yell for his sunglasses up to a woman he is leaving with two children. She aims a pistol at him, glancing back and forth between him and their son crying and his daughter sleeping on the couch. Stan runs off to catch a man who owes him a debt and finds that the man will not square his debt with him.



Figure 8



Figure 9

The next vignette returns to Stan's home where he and his wife slow dance in a circle, she embracing him and him flaccidly hanging his wrists around her waist after she places them there. The song, "This bitter Earth," ends and he walks away as she pleads silently and throws her hands up stating that, "Memories don't seem mine, like half eaten cake and rabbit skins stretched on the backyard fences. My grandmother, mother dear, mot dear, dragging her shadow across the porch. Standing bare headed under the sun, cleaning red catfish with white rum." She picks up and holds Angela's crib shoes to her breast talking about her distant memories of being in the South.



Figure 10

In the following scene, Burnett switches between shots of a group of boys and a group of hanging sheep a few times before entering the slaughterhouse scene where the sheep are butchered, skinned, and their remnants washed away to the sound of Little Walter's "Mean Old World."

Stan's wife attempts to talk him into bed once again and is rejected once again. Frustrated with him ignoring her, his wife storms to another room, leaving Stan alone at the table. Angela

touches his face and rubs his shoulders as she and her mother share gazes, his eyes never leaving Angela, and the mother cries alone.

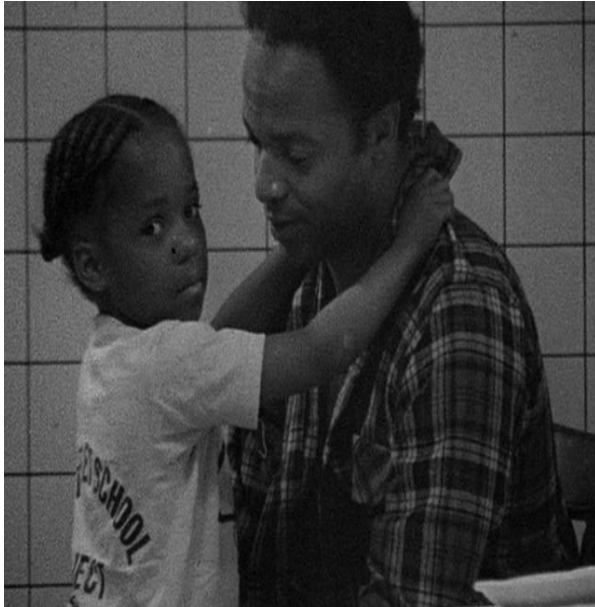


Figure 11

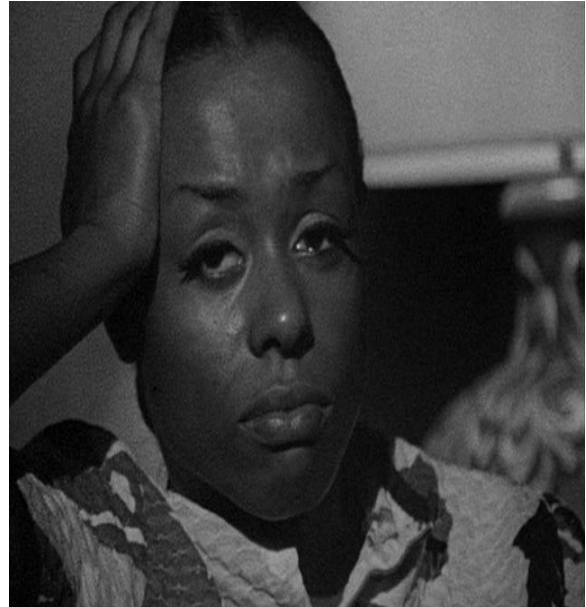


Figure 12

Stan, Bracy, Eugene, and their families go on a trip to see a horse race and have a picnic in the country. Stan sleeps on his wife's shoulder as she smiles, and Eugene gets a flat tire before they arrive. The spare is no longer in the trunk so they are forced to drive back on the car's rim. Bracy is upset because he feels that he had a winning bet on a horse that he never got to play. Stan, his wife, and Angela arrive home where Stan Jr. has left the door unlocked and the three share a laugh about rain being the product of the devil beating his wife, a southern expression. Stan states that he needs a new job, smiles at his wife, and touches her for the first time in the film.

The final vignette shows a handicapped woman arriving to Stan's house where a group of women are gathered with Stan's wife. The young woman is pregnant and all the women smile

and congratulate her. This scene fades away to sheep being raised by their hind legs up a conveyer, past Stan and on to slaughter. Smiling, Stan herds the sheep up the ramp toward the goats and the film ends.



Figure 13



Figure 14



Figure 15

Part Three: Blaxploitation

In *Framing Blackness*, Ed Guerrero provides a crucial insight into the importance of including a discussion of historical context when unraveling the meta-meanings of post-1970, black film.²⁰ Guerrero explains that although the 1960s was not the germinal era of African-American themed movies, there was a three-tiered collision that became seminal to the rise in black film and the perception of racial representation of African Americans thus resulting in a genus of Blaxploitation. The tiered collision was composed of three elements: “the rising political and social consciousness of black people; an outspoken, critical dissatisfaction with Hollywood’s persistent degradation of African Americans in films; and the near-economic collapse of the film industry”.²¹ The Blaxploitation genre was described by Christopher Sieving as a “black movie boom of the early and middle 1970s, during which dozens of black-oriented films were produced (initially by major studios, later by independents and fringe companies)”.²² The 1970s historically marks the single extended period of time in which African Americans had, “significant sustained...participation in Hollywood during the twentieth century”.²³ In fact, Sieving states that, “the black-themed movies of the 1960s [were] especially peculiar given that decade’s status as a highly unstable and formative period after both the African American freedom movement, which achieved tremendous gains and experienced crushing setbacks within the time frame, and the American film industry was exiting its classic phase and entering an era of aesthetic aridity and economic volatility”. Blaxploitation, as a genre, had a certain type and

²⁰ Ed Guerrero, *Framing Blackness: The African American Image in Film*. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), 4.

²¹ Guerrero, *Framing Blackness*, 69.

²² Christopher Sieving, *Soul Searching: Black Themed Cinema from the March on Washington to the Rise of Blaxploitation* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2011), 5.

²³ Sieving, *Soul Searching*, 4.

formula. The typified protagonist was the justified bad guy who risked it all to combat racist oppression, typically through prostitution, drug selling, and general violence (sexual and physical).²⁴ Crime and law enforcement problems were a consequential norm of the post-war industrialized American landscape, and the two elements became focal mainstays in the popular media, similar to the preponderance of cowboy and Indian films after the Civil War and during the height of the Vietnam occupation. In response, Blaxploitation emerged, with its glorification of black, urban crime fantasies. The films re-employed classic stereotypical roles that were only available to black actors: The Buck, Coon, Tom, Tragic Mulatto, and the Mammy returned to the screen to represent black people and, thus, signifiers emerged. The mammy became sexual, yet still remained in the background, and she maintained the “feisty black woman trope” of so many past eye-rolling, loud talking maids. Now, however, they were typically half naked, and in lieu of eye-rolling and snooping about, they fought men with the typically ultimate goal of bringing down a criminal empire headed by a white woman. Blaxploitation seemingly revolutionized the portrayal of black women; they went from maids to heroines and they shifted from headscarves to machine guns, and black men went from butler uniforms to pimps in leisure suits and all the flair of an over-processed peacock. Despite this new presentation of black women, who now appeared to have agency in modifying their appearances, choosing their sexual partners, and stepping out of the domestic sphere into one in which they fought alongside their black male counterparts against the white forces of oppression, it is imperative that we see the Blaxploitation woman for what she is, a modern-day Mammy figure whose function it is to care for the men in her life.

²⁴ William Van Deburg (As seen in John Robert Terry, "Towards the Gendering of Blaxploitation and Black Power," *Madison Historical Review*: Vol. 9, Article 5 (2012): 79-105, accessed November 13, 2015, <http://commons.lib.jmu.edu/mhr/vol9/iss1/5/>.)

The mostly all-black films were a huge hit with younger black men from urban centers who overwhelmingly delighted in the sights and sounds of explosions and murder of white men.²⁵ The predominantly male, black middle-class and black working-class audience, which was undeniably misrepresented on screen, sought economic and social equality and cultural representation in popular media (film, magazine, television).²⁶ They were unimpressed with the roles of black men up to 1971, which featured actors like Sidney Poitier, who served the function of the token black character in films designed to ensure white cultural supremacy. Simultaneously, black activism movements, which involved many of the black migrants who fled the South in hopes for better opportunities, overwhelmingly decried and very openly and publicly resisted Blaxploitation films and the (un)reality that they represented. When black actors finally broke onto the Hollywood scene, there was a general sense of redemption and empowerment through their visibility, but it was short lived. Blaxploitation's powerful ability to reshape the image of the black man from mild mannered to powerful and to employ many black people in Hollywood, could not negate the manner in which it made blacks societal victims.

Cultural marginalization was the impetus for the black film genre that would go on and later be coined by NAACP leader Junius Griffin as 'Blaxploitation'. Fearing lawsuits, the studio houses began to integrate and employ blacks to do small jobs around the set to make peace. Mario Van Peebles was offered a lucrative contract to film *Sweet Sweetback* through Columbia. Van Peebles declined so that he could do the film himself, and his rebellion became a symbol of

²⁵ John Robert Terry, "Towards the Gendering of Blaxploitation and Black Power," *Madison Historical Review*: Vol. 9, Article 5 (2012): 93-94, accessed November 13, 2015, <http://commons.lib.jmu.edu/mhr/vol9/iss1/5>.

²⁶ Predominantly represented as male because the black activism movements were seen as male movements and their (the movement's) faults as the failure of black men (Terry, "Towards the Gendering", 79-105)

getting one over the unjust world of film.²⁷ When Hollywood had reaped the lucrative success from the films to prevent going bankrupt and Blaxploitation ended, many of the jobs that had been created for blacks in Hollywood vanished because with the success of films like *The Godfather*, Hollywood no longer relied on the easy money offered by the exploitative films. The death of Blaxploitation came naturally, as a consequence of economical shift and mounting protests against the genre's treatment of black men and children, and its negative stereotypes and glamorization of sex and drugs within the black community.

From Melvin Van Peebles' 1971 film, *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*, and Gordon Parks Jr.'s (1971) *Shaft*, Hollywood had discovered in Blaxploitation an introduction to a successful model for black filmmaking. The exploitation of blackness on film was evidenced in 211 of said films released between 1971 and 1977. The success of Blaxploitation films was due, in part, to its mainstream response to the post-Civil Rights-era landscape of the United States, which saw redistribution of African American populations from the South to various places in the country; desegregation, voting, racial tension, and the regular addition of blacks to the Hollywood landscape. An unfortunate byproduct of Blaxploitation, whether intentional or not, was that it did not celebrate or encourage further social and economic progress; rather, this genre formed types, which became exploitable stereotypes.

The representation and exploitation of black people on the Hollywood screen was apparent to nearly all who watched the films, but none more so than black scholars and the black

²⁷ Van Peebles suggested that fellow filmmakers bypass the white dollar by putting girls on the corner for prostitution to make the funds needed to meet costs. He stated, "Put a couple chicks on the block, raise money, and make a film." In Don Lee, "The Bittersweet of Sweetback/ or, Shake Yo Money Maker."

middle class.²⁸ Both the black middle class and scholars alike were dissatisfied with the majority of the representations of African Americans in American film, depicting blacks as either Sidney Poitier-type figures, who submitted and deferred to their white colleagues, or as immoral pimps, drug dealers, prostitutes, and criminals. And while both the submissive and criminal figures surely existed in real life, the representations in movies were hyperbolic representations of a minority of a much larger group, rendering as absurd the reality depicted on screen. Despite the disapproval of scholars and the black middle class, young, black males were excitedly attending these Blaxploitation films, spending their money and time fueling a genre and industry. In these films they found black male characters that finally had power, money, mobility, freedom, and a quick way out of their current situations.

Throughout the history of film production, normalcy relied on an assumption of (typically, middle class) whiteness. In other words, to have a relation to and with the audiences of films, one only needed to relay the norms of white America. Eithne Quinn wrote that the productions of the sixties and seventies, “ma[de] implicit claims about how filmic images of whiteness relate to social reality, but these connections often remain abstract and discursive”.²⁹ Daniel J. Leab, one of the earliest scholars to study black-themed cinema, concluded that, “Whether *Sambo* or *Superspade*, the black image on screen has always lacked dimensions of humanity”.³⁰ Christopher Sieving concluded from Leab’s assessment that the prime images and films which represent the historical matter of the *post-humanization-1960s* were essentially, “inadequate and offensive, and judges those who participated in their production to have

²⁸ Terry, “Towards the Gendering”, 79-105.

²⁹ Eithne Quinn, “Sincere Fictions: The Production Cultures of Whiteness in Late 1960s Hollywood,” *The Velvet Light Trap* 67, no. 1 (Spring 2011): 3-13, accessed September 20, 2015, doi: 10.1353/vlt.2011.0008.

³⁰ Sieving, *Soul Searching*, 4.

abdicated their responsibility to African American audiences”.³¹ Sieving performed a study of the history of black and/or African-American-themed film studies and how this culturally race-based art went from a fetishized niche to an accepted and acknowledged space for authentic voices and aesthetic realism of blackness in the genre known today as the Blaxploitation-film formula.

American entertainment portrayed blackness as caricature for so long that it was hard to conceive of black stars in serious films about black people and black struggles. Studios did not offer to fund black film projects because a market had not been created for the black audience to enjoy; instead black moviegoers were told to escape to cowboy movies just like everyone else. Black filmmakers began using their own money and spreading word of their own films through word-of-mouth and street-side sales of the films. Once the large production companies learned of this expanding market, they immediately wanted to know, Jacqueline Bobo explains, how to, “exploit this audience at the box office”.³² The major companies learned that, “word of mouth in the black community is worth millions in advertising and promotion”.³³ Beyond Blaxploitation films, mainstream films featuring African-American actors were not aimed at captivating black audiences. Sieving suggests that, per Hollywood’s standards, the most practical method of making black films was to intentionally produce a version of race that excluded an authentic African-American point of view. The exclusion of African American voices during production

³¹ Ibid., 5.

³² Jacqueline Bobo. “The Subject is Money: Reconsidering the Black Film Audience as a Theoretical Paradigm.” *Black American Literature Forum* 25, no. 2, Black Film Issue (Summer 1991): 421, accessed May 19, 2015. <http://www.umass.edu/afroam/downloads/reading20.pdf>.

³³ Ibid.

was evident even in films whose casts were all black (e.g. *A Raisin in the Sun*).³⁴ Sieving notes that when *Raisin* was picked up for the big screen, the major production company, Columbia Pictures, made a gesture of faith by bringing the author of the play, Lorraine Hansberry, on board. She was used as a sort of cultural ruse by the production house. Hansberry's sole purpose as the film's screenwriter was to, "signal a commitment by Columbia [to black America] to honor her [Hansberry's] intentions in delivering a truthful dramatic portrayal of a working-class black family from Chicago's South Side".³⁵ The effort was mitigated by the company's "concern for the sensibilities of white viewers".³⁶ Black-themed art, then, with its mimetic nature, was imperative for African Americans in finding individual, as well as collective, identities, and also in cultivating and broadcasting an identity that subverted the hegemon's notion of what it was to be black.

Prior to Blaxploitation, black people, especially black women, could only see themselves through a lens of whiteness. In times when many black people could be lynched or beaten for looking at a white person, going to the movies provided some black people a way to stare openly into the eyes of whites and to momentarily experience through that gaze what it could be like to feel like more than the maids and working-class poor that they were. When Blaxploitation erupted onto the Hollywood scene, black men no longer looked upon the screen in total opposition. They gained a power through the rebelliousness of the personas flashing before them. Black women, on the other hand, had a more complicated relationship with the black films, as their roles had not progressed very much from the sex-hungry, immoral animal and the

³⁴ *A Raisin in the sun*, directed by Daniel Petrie. (Columbia Pictures Corporation, 1961), accessed November 19, 2015, http://www.amazon.com/Raisin-Sun-Sidney-Poitier/dp/B004L87XQG/ref=sr_1_4?s=instant-video&ie=UTF8&qid=1453385326&sr=8-4&keywords=raisin+in+the+sun

³⁵ Sieving, *Soul Searching*, 3.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

uniform-clad mammie. *Killer of Sheep* came along and quietly disrupted many of the stereotypes that Blaxploitation had established as credentials for black films. Blaxploitation resonated with many black men, identifying with an on-screen character and claiming some sense of power from it, whereas black women had no such figure on the screen because Blaxploitation treated them as hypersexualized mammies, creating an even further gender inequity, both on screen and off.

And although Blaxploitation had created a space for African Americans in film that deviated from the tropes of mammy, maid, butler, or comical sidekick, it did so by simply replacing them with other tropes: the black buck, and hypersexualized men and women. Eventually black women did retain a space in Blaxploitation films, even becoming pseudo-heroines. They relied on their nudity and sexual acts to win fights rather than strength and intellect, and almost invariably, their fights were with other women – white women. The Blaxploitation woman was not fighting for her own agency or for any misdoings against her; rather, she was fighting for retribution and vengeance, usually over the death of a black man who had been wronged by “the white man.” Her on-screen portrayal was almost caricaturish, and in a disturbingly recursive way, her name almost referred back, in some way, to the mammy trope, such as with “Bad Mamma Jamma” or “Bad Mamma.”

Blaxploitation glamorized, hyperbolized, and misrepresented most Black American experiences, exploiting Black Americans rather than maintaining any sort of foothold in reality. Just one decade before the rise of Blaxploitation films, in 1965, The Moynihan Report was published, which blamed the economic failure of black Americans on the lack of black fathers and the inevitable, resultant broken homes. When the black films flooded the market with

negative images, the popular attitude at UCLA was, as Burnett describes it, “anti-Hollywood...with a shared disdain for the Blaxploitation vogue of the day and a propensity toward filmmaking that was relevant”.³⁷ Blaxploitation, in its response to the mounting criticism of exploitation, simply reified this message of socially degrading irrelevance. And in response to Blaxploitation’s misguided message, Burnett and his colleagues in the L.A. Rebellion felt that Blaxploitation’s era was up and set out to produce counter narratives to the one perpetuated in Hollywood.

Black activism leaders like Jesse Jackson, Junius Griffin, and Huey P. Newton took notice and began to speak out against the genre. Black identities were further problematized publicly as they exchanged lack of representation for misrepresentation and perpetuation of stereotypes, which undermined the progress of the black working class. As John Robert Terry points out, “Blaxploitation replaced old stereotypes of submissive blacks with new stereotypes of hyper-sexualized, violent, anti-social blacks living in a fictionalized ghetto world characterized by vice and lawlessness”.³⁸ The awakening of the black middle class and the evolution of the black consciousness movements naturally caused the impetus for and against Blaxploitation, and films like *Killer of Sheep* were among the first to counter and offer stylistic and content remedies to the revolutionary and highly flawed genre of Blaxploitation.

The black middle class in which Stan believes himself to exist is therefore an important battleground for black identity. In a conversation with his friend, Stan comments that “I ain’t

³⁷ Victor Vazquez, “Killer of Sheep,” Milestone Films & Videos, 2007, accessed August 15, 2015. <http://www.killerofsheep.com/images/KOSfinalPK.pdf>.

³⁸ Terry, “Towards the Gendering”, 80.

poor! I donate to the Salvation Army. If you're poor you can't afford to give nothing away".³⁹

Burnett intentionally focuses on this portion of the black community possibly because they are the people most susceptible to the fantasy world that glorified Hollywood's version of blackness. While Blaxploitation was busy revolutionizing the screen presence of black men, many in the black middle-class community felt threatened by the liberation narrative and its appeal to young black boys. The fantasy of escaping cultural oppression through male sexual power and violent acts became a touchstone of Blaxploitation.

Women in these narratives were portals to manhood, as such that *Sweet Sweetback* could not become a man without the act of sex. Women were also placed further into the margins of this fantasy as their roles of mammies were replaced with the stereotypical roles of concubines, prostitutes, and static support for the male hero even when she was the star of the film (Coffee, Cleopatra Jones). Black women's roles on screen reflected what their veil had limited them to in reality, meaning that these women's lives were background to the patriarchy of even the very social movements they struggled to see succeed. With sexism being a dominant trait of many of the black militant groups, it became difficult for black women to be more than simply an aid to the success of black men despite them having worked on the forefront of the civil rights movements and in the trenches of organizations such as SNCC and BPP, CORE and the Nation of Islam.⁴⁰ Black women encountered many hierarchical obstacles in their efforts to organize the movements alongside young, black Americans. Civil Rights activists like Fannie Lou Hamer had fought long and hard to ensure progress towards equality, and much to the displeasure of, and

³⁹ *Killer of Sheep*. Directed by Charles Burnett. Performed by Henry G. Sanders and Kaycee Moore. United States: S.n., 1978. DVD published 2008.

⁴⁰ Terry, "Towards the Gendering", 88.

mostly without the acknowledgment of the many male leaders, women typically performed major roles in these organizations. Hamer, Septima Clark, and other important female activists were told that they were “‘ignorant of the political process, should listen to their [male] leaders and just return home,’ a sentiment echoed by Lawrence Guyot of SNCC in the mid-1960s, suggesting that they step back and let the men come forth.”⁴¹ Sentiments against black feminism continued even while leaders like Stokely Carmichael, who supported women’s progress, made comments in the 1960s that, “the only position for women in SNCC... is prone”.⁴² Black women operate within the veil and the “oppositional gaze” to pursue progress for not only themselves as women, but as black women, and for the whole of black people. Blaxploitation changed the way that black women were viewed, but did not evolve black women beyond the negative tropes of the previous centuries of depictions as glorified mammies. Even when we see characters like Brown Coffee, critics still refer to her as a “sexing crime fighter” unlike the way they see Sweetback as being transformed into a man through his acts of sex (some unconsenting, probably an ode to Eldridge Cleaver’s book remarks of rape and the emasculation and taking back of black manhood).⁴³

Part Four: History of the film

⁴¹ Sabina Peck, 'The Only Position for Women In SNCC Is Prone': Stokely Carmichael And The Perceived Patriarchy Of Civil Rights Organizations In America," *History In The Making Journal* 1, no.1 (June 2012): 29-35, accessed October 7, 2015, <https://historyitm.files.wordpress.com/2013/08/peck.pdf>.

⁴² Terry, "Towards the Gendering", 86.

⁴³ Ibid., 87.

“Eldridge Cleaver is probably the most representative of the contradictory positions of male black power advocates. In *Soul on Ice* he apologizes to black women for the emasculation of black males, arguing that what black women need is strong black men to protect them. In the same book he actually argues that the rape of white women, after he had practiced a bit on black women, was “‘an insurrectionary act’” and delighted him in that he was “‘defying and trampling upon white man’s law.’”

(Eldridge Cleaver. *Soul on Ice* (New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1968, 14).)

Charles Burnett, born in Vicksburg, Mississippi, had moved to the Watts area of Los Angeles, California, as a child and attended UCLA for his Master's in Fine Arts after deciding that his first choice of being an electrician would not make him happy. Both Burnett's southern-L.A. background and his working-class background steered his work in black films, and with a nurse's aide and a military member for parents, Burnett understood growing up on the decent end of poor. He was raised by his grandmother from the age of three after his parents went their own ways and witnessed a period in Watts when the upper and lower classes worked together as one community prior to the Civil Rights Movement. When the Civil Rights Movement made progress, Burnett watched people leave the area in search of better opportunities, and he saw the community change. The shared direction and sense of identity changed for the working-class people around him. Charles Burnett recalls Los Angeles being a place where people had a direction and a purpose before the Civil Rights Movement.⁴⁴

Despite the changes to include black workers in many fields, prior to the 1970s Hollywood largely excluded blacks, holding little to no place for blacks to work. Burnett's aim was not to create a piece of work that would serve as his Hollywood calling card or to piece together the next academy award-winning film, or another tautological, exploitative image of the urban blackness. Instead, he aimed to masterfully portray the life he came from as a platform for social discussion in contrast to those who sought to join the masses of black filmmakers making Hollywood's version of blackness. For the few black filmmakers operating right after the Watts riots and before King's 1968 assassination, Burnett claims that there was a huge pressure to deliver everything the filmmaker wanted to say in every film because there was a very real

⁴⁴ Bérénice Reynaud, "An Interview with Charles Burnett," *Black American Literature Forum* 25, no. 2, Black Film Issue (Summer 1991): 323-334, accessed September 5, 2015, doi: 10.2307/3041690.

possibility that he or she may not have another opportunity to create another film to finish a message. Professor Elyseo Taylor formed the department for Ethno-Communications at UCLA, encouraging Burnett and others from marginalized groups of color to create work that responded to the negative images that Hollywood had broadcast about their people's cultures. Burnett and his colleagues created work that challenged the fantasy of their lives that Hollywood had created and fostered. He and his cohort became known unofficially as both the LA Rebellion and the LA (film) School, a name coined by a NYU filmmaker named Clyde Taylor, and a classification that Burnett strongly disliked because the students did not consider themselves a formal school.⁴⁵ During this time period there was no expectation that he or any of his fellow minority filmmakers would ever see a Hollywood distribution, and this encouraged them to produce films that they wanted to make rather than a Hollywood film presented for mass consumption. They were allowed to produce art with a consciousness, and Burnett struck a chord with *Killer of Sheep* that despite being against an industry which held no place for him, resulted in a legacy of discussion within small circles.

Burnett's style, as evidenced by his 1969 project, *Several Friends*, was influenced primarily by the Italian neo-realist film by Vittoria De Sica, *Bicycle Thieves*, and his professor Basil Wright's *Song of Ceylon*. *Several Friends* was Burnett's initial attempt at a multi-vignette, verité (*documentary*) styled film which followed the lives of several unemployed, working-class individuals living in Watts. Burnett, running out of time to remain in residence at UCLA, altered his plans of making *Several Friends* a full-length film, and instead opted to leave it as a 40-

⁴⁵ Samantha Noelle Sheppard, "L.A. Rebellion: Creating New Black Cinema," *UCLA Center for the Study of Women: CSW Update* (December, 2011): 10-22, accessed January 23, 2016, <https://www.cinema.ucla.edu/sites/default/files/LA-Rebellion.pdf>.

minute short. Much of the cast, crew, plot, and techniques from Burnett's 1969 short would become the skeleton for what we now know as *Killer of Sheep*, which was completed in 1977 as Burnett's master's degree project at UCLA. *Killer of Sheep* was filmed in Charles Burnett's hometown of Watts, on black and white, 16mm film using natural light and was restored in 2007 in a 35mm format for release on DVD. Burnett's project was created with intentional grittiness for an amateur effect (handheld cameras, improvised dialogue, etc.) because he wanted the film to appear as though it was created by someone with no filmmaking knowledge. Charles Burnett had a very limited budget for his filmmaking, and a significant portion of the work done on his film was achieved through the helping hands of his film school cohort and people of the Watts area. The sound production for the film was done by his peer Charles Bracy, and the music selected by Burnett came from records shared by him and his mother. In fact, a secondary function of the film was to preserve the music he had grown up with. *Killer of Sheep* was filmed on weekends over the course of a year, with a delay in filming because one of the main actors was imprisoned mid-filming (the name of whom is not available).⁴⁶

While Burnett's project, *Killer of Sheep*, was created for the fulfillment of his degree requirements, the film's purpose was much broader: to serve as a reflexive commentary about the socio-economic issues that faced black Americans as well as the glaring inequalities in every aspect of life despite the progress of the Civil Rights movement. Burnett intended for *Killer of Sheep* to be a commentary on the real lives of real African Americans living through the struggles and changes of the late 1960s and early 1970s. He was successful in this, as well as humanizing the black family from a man's point of view. Black women's roles as the

⁴⁶ Victor Vazquez, "Killer of Sheep," Milestone Films & Videos, 2007, accessed August 15, 2015. <http://www.killerofsheep.com/images/KOSfinalPK.pdf>.

domesticated nurturers and housewives, however, remained unchanged in pre-Blaxploitation, Blaxploitation films, and *Killer of Sheep* (and arguably even today, 40 years later). So, while Burnett attempted to produce a counternarrative, a real-life depiction, he did so, similarly to those he resisted, by using women as reinforcements that held up their men, families, and communities.

Incorporating realistic elements that artistically appear as though they are plucked from real life (neo-realism) is a tactic that engages viewers of documentaries and fictional films. Art of any sort, and film is no exception, provides a unique opportunity to view the contexts and popular representations of groups because art's very mimetic qualities make it engaging and realistic. Neo-realistic films popularized in the foreign market crossed into American cinema, and were promoted in the emerging market of black films. *Killer of Sheep* is one such film, which successfully reinvented the representations of black identity from hyper-fantasy to reality.

Part Five: African American Identity & Film

Ideology refers to a system of beliefs that are emphasized by a dominating power structure in a society in order to influence the beliefs and actions of those in lower classes (identity). Identity also refers to an individual's perception and self-categorization into a role in relation to everyone else in the world, whether that world is the global or local community.⁴⁷

African Americans have, historically and generally, had to revise, reconfigure, reassess, reshape, and reimagine their identities, senses of selves, and, more largely, their overall place in American society because of America's history of chattel slavery and racial injustice. History shows that this identity is separate from the white majority, as was the case in Watts, thus inspiring *Killer of Sheep*. African Americans have been systematically labeled, categorized, disregarded, and subordinated, which is evidenced in the media and everyday interactions among people.

Popular cultural events reified the characterization and the cultural image of blacks as childlike wild people whose purpose it was to be seen in the context of another race's progress.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Jan E. Stets and Peter J. Burke, "Identity Theory and Social Identity Theory," *Social Psychology Quarterly* 63, no. 3 (2000): 224-237, accessed November 30, 2015. <http://wat2146.ucr.edu/papers/00a.pdf>.

⁴⁸ An example of black identity being directly reified is the 1901 Pan-American Exposition. The exposition was a sort-of coming out party for the architecture of Buffalo, New York, and the financial endeavors of John Carrère. The Pan-Am Expo was a cultural experience based on a human, scientific, architectural, and animal exhibits, which as a whole was themed the "Progress of Man" by Karl Bitter. The popular function offered spectators displays of innovation and pseudo-authentic culture along its midway. Mexican and African villages were set up and live performers acted out roles that had been taught to them by white showmen. The Old Plantation concession presented crowds, which included black people, with an edutainment spectacle for the audience which paid 10 cents per head to enter. The brilliance of the attraction was that in the year 1900, there were live, authentic "Southern Darkies" who were living out the day-to-day life of work and play. Behind the attraction was a successful, white entertainment entrepreneur named Fred McClelland who had created a month-long school for African American men, women, and children who had never seen slavery, so that they could learn how to be authentic southern negroes. When the audiences finally met the students, McClelland had transformed them into, "a caricature of black culture that not only came to be known as an accurate representation of black people but also defined and constructed blackness itself". The feeling of blackness was constructed through the experience of slavery and passed down generation to generation, but it was also continuously being shaped backwards into the pet derivative of what the white plantation owners would have desired in a favored slave. Amma Y. Ghartey-Tagoe Kootin states that, "blackness was defined by the false face painted in the color of pitch black, the false dialect, and the false

Race is a socially constructed identity that is largely defined by capitalism and its offspring, racism, according to social activist and feminist Francis Beal. Non-European races are relegated to the margins of society by means of a power hierarchy. The creation of whiteness established European descendants as the normal, and the cultural and racial ideologies of whiteness were cues to aspire to and be set apart as the dominant cultural force in America. Whiteness, as the dominantly normalized culture, by default makes black identity the “other” or the “them”, compared to the non-marginalized “us”.⁴⁹ Blackness in the United States is socially constructed as subordinate to non-black Americans, and it is shaped by power, and the inequality of itself compared to other groups. Stuart Hall observes in his essay “Cultural Identity and Diaspora” that, :

The ways in which black people, black experiences, were positioned and subjected in the dominant regimes of representation were the effects of a critical exercise of cultural power and normalization. Not only in Said’s “orientalist” sense, were we constructed as different and other within the categories of knowledge of the West by those regimes.

They had the power to make us see and experience *ourselves* as “Other” ...⁵⁰

culture that minstrelsy presented onstage. The white theatrical construction of blackness quickly became interchangeable with actual black culture and even actual African Americans”. As with any societal role, adherence to the performance of one’s given role is what confers the level of authenticity, power, credibility, and the ability to continuously evolve or reappear throughout time. Debatably, African Americans have a somewhat different and more difficult quest to find identity and an authentic self in the United States, in post-Civil-Rights-and-Vietnam-War-Era 1970s, when *Killer of Sheep* was filmed.

Library.buffalo.edu, “The Architectural Scheme - Pan-American Exposition of 1901,” *University at Buffalo Libraries* (2015), accessed September 19, 2015, <http://library.buffalo.edu/pan-am/exposition/art/plan.html#civilization>.

⁴⁹ Judith Freidenberg. “The Social Construction and Reconstruction of the Other: Fieldwork in El Barrio,” *Anthropological Quarterly* 71, no. 4 (1998): 169–85, accessed January 1, 2016, doi:10.2307/3317440.

⁵⁰ Stuart Hall. “Cultural Identity and Diaspora.” (1993) *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*. Ed. Patrick Williams and Chrisman. London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1994. 392-401

The depictions of blacks by Hollywood served two main cultural desires: to satisfy whites who sought entertainment in the coonanisms and obedience of blacks, and for blacks who yearned to see an accurate and realistic depiction of their lives.⁵¹ Entertainment served as cultural mediator and the platform for the education of identity. Some people found it difficult to negotiate between the depiction of blackness in the media, film, and reality. In order to escape a racial identity based on the social perception of meekness, timidity and servitude, blacks fought against these prescribed, and often accepted (default), roles through activism and later, through creating a space for themselves in film where the gaze was toward them on screen. The absence of powerful black figures in cinema led actors like Sidney Poitier, Ossie Davis, Ruby Dee, and Lena Horne to accept roles on which they did not necessarily agree but took simply to ensure that blacks were visible in the whitewashed landscape of Hollywood. Blacks wanted to be seen as powerful and sexual in an arena that had for so long cast them as timid, asexual, or overly sexual.

In *Killer of Sheep*, blackness relates to more than just Stan's present socio-economic status; his identity is rooted in a history of oppression and marginalization as non-normative. For close to 300 years, African-American identity was determined for slaves through constructs, systematic doctrines, and ideologies of the larger, non-African-American population. Slaves were instructed on how to behave and how to relate to the world around them. Instruction of the *self* is explained by psychologist Carl Rogers as a process of maturation. Growth in this sense can only be obtained if someone is in a situation that offers them, "genuineness (openness and

⁵¹ The term 'Coonanisms' is one that I have designed to refer to the acts, behaviors, and exaggerations represented in the tropes of the Coon, whose embodiment reflects an exaggeration of fictitious and stereotypical emotions and a lack of logical action by a character who serves as a relief element in a film. These behaviors by black actors generally contrast with the seriousness of white characters.

self-disclosure), acceptance (being seen with unconditional positive regard), and empathy (being listened to and understood)".⁵² Black people did not have that racial maturation socially – although this progress was longed for and evidenced through civil rights and black power movements—until black power motivated films changed the popular perception of blackness. Black people were taught by other races what it meant and how to be black. Accepting the interpretations by these non-black races about blackness groomed African Americans to be inferior as their very definition was grounded in another culture's understanding of them and that blacks be seen as the subjective *other*.

Recall that there is no actual plot to the film; Stan's story in *Killer of Sheep* is inadvertently about his identity as a black, working-class urbanite living in 1970s Watts. Stan's identity is grounded in the world around him, to those poorer than him, those capable of the crimes he stands morally above, and even his struggle is a part of his identity. This falls in line with social identity theory, which hypothesizes that identity is grounded in relation to the group the person aligns with in society (in-group) and that this identity is strengthened by awareness of, and non-alliance with, another group (out-group).⁵³ Michael A. Hogg argues that individuals negotiate group belonging, behaviors of the group, and also how social behavior is governed amongst themselves.⁵⁴ Social identity theory encapsulates all groups, regardless of size amongst the population at whole, such as religious or racial identity. The result is a self-insulated, self-

⁵² Saul McLeod, "Carl Rogers | Simply Psychology," Simplypsychology.Org (2007), accessed October 29, 2015, <http://www.simplypsychology.org/carl-rogers.html>.

⁵³ For more on in-group and out-group, see Tajfel and Turner, 1979; Hogg and Abrams, 1988

⁵⁴ M.A. Hogg, *Contemporary Social Psychological Theories*, ed. P.J. Burke, (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006), 111-136.

selected (if not born into) population that produces its own languages, normative behaviors, customs, and motivations, even at the risk of ethnocentrism.⁵⁵

Charles Burnett created a character, Stan, who was counter to the existing tropes of black men in Hollywood's exploitative films. Burnett wanted Stan to be an honestly, rather than fantasmically, relatable, lead character. Burnett's characters' identities are a contrast to the characterizations of exploitative films, but the filmmaker includes four obvious nods to the genre with the inclusion of Smoke, Scooter, and the two other leather-clad men stealing the television set early in the film. The negative male roles serve to contrast and clarify that Stan is nothing like these men; he is the anti-coon. Each of Burnett's main roles is centered on identities of normalcy within their culture, which is a far cry from the Hollywood trope of average black people at the time. Despite being born into a social identity based on race, economics and marginalization, Stan and his family steer clear of what the 1970s media would have them believe is their norm. Stan works long hours at a local meat house and turns away the prospect of an easy buck in exchange for committing a crime even though the premise of the crime is one set up by almost every major Blaxploitation film (someone has been wronged, one must seek revenge). Stan's identity is a depiction of black manhood that removes the veil, or the mask, of black manhood. The wife departs from Blaxploitation's image of the heroine with her non-violence and her acceptance of loss and domesticity; she lets life happen *to* her. Stan's son retains the role of a child and does not seek, as Sweetback did, to achieve manhood through the conquest of sex or the violence of rape. Angela, the daughter, has no comparisons to the Blaxploitation drama as girls only existed in these films in sexual professions such as Dolomite's Queen Bee's harem.

⁵⁵ M.A. Hogg and D. Abrams, *Social Identifications: A Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations and Group Processes* (London: Routledge, 1988), 184-200.

Identity is not determined in *Killer of Sheep* by statements of “I am,” but rather in the everyday activities of the characters. Stan’s identity is rooted in his roles as a father, a husband, and a man who hopes for more than what he has, though we see he routinely finds himself going nowhere. Stan’s wife’s identity is conceived through her silence, her rare outspokenness, her concern for her family and friends happiness, tending to the home, and constantly primping in reflective surfaces and mirrors. The wives and women of the families are grounded in their identities as generic black women while the men each have goals, dreams, and lives that extend beyond the front stoop. The audience is aware of the otherness of their identities through ongoing visuals of poverty, such as unpaved roads, ill-fitting clothing, and shots of the seemingly war-ravaged community. It is clear that Burnett is not creating a comical, or even entertaining, spectacle but rather cinema verité, a realistic form of story about true identity and struggle.

Burnett fosters discussion of religion, sexuality, morality, and normalcy in *Killer of Sheep*. Stan’s relationship with religion is mentioned and just as quickly disregarded in the second vignette when he discusses his despair with his friend as he kneels on the floor before him. His friend, resorting to the default “answer” to black problems, asks Stan when he last attended church, to which Stan nods the question off, disregards it, and his friend then asks him why he does not just commit suicide. Stan’s resolve to look to his daughter instead of killing himself or to go to church shows that his belief is in himself despite his circumstances; this may be a temporary aspect of Stan’s life due to working at the meat house. Black identity, and those of Burnett’s characters, has been one constructed within the confines of another group’s identity, or rather, what it lacks of the larger group’s identity. The productions of blackness prior to *Killer of Sheep* rarely defied cultural stereotypes about black identities in a meaningful, socially

conscious manner that included people of color in more than token roles with the sensibilities of the white audience in mind (example, *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*).⁵⁶

Tropes and Types

Clyde Taylor once noted that, “the movies are a place where the fundamental national ideals are set up,” and as such, film became a place for the negotiation of cultural mores and norms.⁵⁷ Film constructed and then perpetuated images of blacks that became stereotypes, and those stereotypes, in turn, became ingrained in black America’s consciousness and behavior. Initially the image of black people was represented by white actors, much in the same way that the European stage featured men playing female parts, because it was socially unacceptable for the portrayed to be players of their own virtues. Black people were imitated by white men wearing black cork oil on their faces – blackface. Later, when films introduced black characters played by black actors, men became neutered and asexual while women maintained the roles of mammies and housekeepers. In fact, black male sexuality was the source of racial power struggle, and when filmmakers portrayed black men engaging in sexual acts, the acts were devoid of emotional attachment. Black women were presented as sexually insatiable and also lacking emotional connection to the act of sex. The portrayal of these people as happy and amenable spoke volumes, conveying to the audience that blacks were happy as slaves and that the roles presented truth of their realities.

⁵⁶ In *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, although Turkle and Warren exist as nurses, the token minority (patient) is a Native American named Chief Bromden. Chief is a silent, mysterious, bigger-than-life character who embodies many stereotypes of Native Americans, even rescuing his white friends and walking off into a pastoral setting at the end of the film. In *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*, Sidney Poitier is the token African American introduced as the fiancé of a white woman, and this introduction is scandalized by his racial placement in a white space.

⁵⁷ Mia Mask, ed., *Contemporary Black American Cinema: Race, Gender, and Sexuality at the Movies*. (New York: Routledge, 2012), 5.

In many ways, the subservience and the isolation from other slaves anchored black women to the white family and crafted their identities as motherly without her own children (whether she had them or not), womanly (large breasts and nurturing), but not sexual unless meeting the caveat as being a sexual lure for the master or a source of breeding. In the case of the mammy, her role was so salient that even when pointed out and problematized by Blaxploitation movies, the only upgrade to this character came in the form of a smaller figure (kept large breasts/cleavage); she swapped her handkerchief hair rag for a coiffed afro, and she sought out the sex from men. It can be assumed that since the mammy was cut off from the other negroes of the estate, with her only family being that of the whites that she worked for, that when she had her moments of breakdown, she did so alone, just as Wife did in *Killer of Sheep*. Neither character's homes belong to them, their pasts intertwined with southern ritual of oppression, and love existed as an abstract notion out of their grasps without the approval of someone else, likely a man.

In cinema (and even literature) we are rarely given any access to the mammy's interior self. Because we are denied interiority, we do not see her life outside of that in which she is taking care of a (typically) white family, or performing domestic duties in both her home and her employer's home. Rather, she is a background object to be utilized, gazed at, consumed, and is there to help nurture a family that seemingly is unable to function without her (despite their subordination of her). The mammy figure is always sharp in wit, wisdom, jokes, opinions, and keen eyes. Later black female figures represented in Blaxploitation-era films are a descendant of the mammy figure; however, we are allowed access to the black female outside of her domestic service somewhat. In other words, conceivably, Foxy Brown or other strong, combative,

vengeful, female figures, perhaps represent the voice of the mammy that was silenced. We, the audience, then, are allowed access (albeit skewed) to this figure, which reveals her as a sexual, feisty, protective woman seeking justice, vindication, and to break free of her oppressed position. Foxy Brown and her contemporaries even held some version of the name momma (mammy) in their monikers, such as Bad Mama or Foxy Mama. Despite all that Burnett did to challenge the roles, tropes, and stereotypes surrounding black men in film, he did little to elevate black women, instead perpetuating their role and creating a modern-day mammy.

The image of blackness has been crafted and influenced by culturally influential means such as slavery, and most relevant to this study, art, specifically the medium of film. The negative, and rarely full, formation of characterization of black men through film media was perpetuated through the social portrayal of blacks in the arts. Black men in films prior to Blaxploitation initially played and depicted as step n' fetch it, black face minstrels and black-faced, and the ever-accommodating Uncle Tom.⁵⁸ The characters representing blackness in both literature and film were the Buck, Coon, Tom, Tragic Mulatto, Magical Negro, and the Mammy.

The Tom, one of the earliest, most common, and longest-enduring character types, developed to portray black men in fiction, was born from Harriet Beecher Stowe's 1903 novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Uncle Tom, the namesake of Stowe's novel, was written as a black man that would be acceptable or palatable to a predominantly white audience. Uncle Tom, or Tom, as the trope would later be called, was endlessly faithful to his masters and to his religion, despite suffering and enduring the abusive, oppressive system of slavery. And although he was beaten, hunted, enslaved, and ridiculed, Tom embodied the ideal, faithful, peaceful servant who believed

⁵⁸ Characters lacked depth and humanity (well-rounded characters were unheard of, unlike white characters).

that the worst thing a slave could do would be to turn on his master, and equally perilous, lose his religious faith. Tom was received as a hero-type character and embodied "ideal blackness" because his reaction to his oppression is what many felt blacks should aspire to. He was the penultimate oppressed black character who held his religiosity and his master's happiness above all. Of course, this trope has drawn criticism since its publication, with many saying that it encourages black readers to deny their own self-respect in the name of peace keeping and religion.

The Tom characterizations displayed black men as those who chomp at the bit to serve whites. As is often the case, this trope made the transition from page to screen. And actor Sidney Poitier, often pegged as portraying the modern Tom character, sacrificed his ideals in exchange for what would become a lifetime of being considered a betrayal to his race, when faced with the decision to continue elements of the Tom trope into 1960s cinema as a condition of having blacks on screen. The presence of characters like Dr. John Wade Prentice (*Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*), Mark Thackeray (*To Sir, with Love*), and Homer Smith (*Lilies of the Field*), aided Poitier in becoming the first black Hollywood star, and put forward a more positive cultural image of black men. Visibility of black men on stage and screens departed from the age-old portrayal of them as nothing more than the butt of a joke, and removed the prevalence of white men in blackface using hyperbolic emotion and action to convey blackness. Criticism inherently mounted against the image of the "good negro" representing blacks, and the black community longed to have some control over production of African American identity in the public's eye.

The rebellion against the tame characterization of black men led to the proliferation of black filmmaking during the black power era, which evolved into Blaxploitation, and this

uprising came in the form of Sweet Sweetback. Sweetback, although revolutionary in many ways, also brought about the reemergence of far worse tropes than the Tom. Sweetback ushered in a genre which glorified the Coon and the Buck in the early 1970s.⁵⁹ The Coon character personified the idea that blacks were entertainment. The Coon would rather die than be married; his children (pickaninies) were lazy, eye-popping, and nappy-headed; and both of these types butchered the English language. Donald Bogle defined Coons as characters who were “No account niggers, those unreliable, crazy, lazy, subhuman creatures [who are] good for nothing”.⁶⁰ Blaxploitation was effective at producing and perpetuating the Coon character, even evolving the trope to include the black Buck stereotype whose life revolved around brutality and sex.

Black women, on the other hand, were depicted as mammies, women whose sole purposes in life were to care for the children and grandchildren of their white masters, the Tragic Mulatto, “Sapphire and Aunt Jemima”.⁶¹ The mammy was a black woman marked by her heaving bosom, heavy stature, and the ever-present head wrap that shielded her natural hair from the world. The caricature of Mammy is historically depicted as being sassy, bossy, nagging,

⁵⁹ Huey P. Newton believed that Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song was revolutionary because it showed excellent examples of black revolutionary action (which became the stereotype of black revolutionaries). As seen in John Robert Terry, "Towards the Gendering of Blaxploitation and Black Power," *Madison Historical Review*: Vol. 9, Article 5 (2012): 79-105, accessed November 13, 2015, <http://commons.lib.jmu.edu/mhr/vol9/iss1/5>.

⁶⁰ *Rastus in Zululand* (1919). Seen in Dominique M. Hardiman, "An Interactive Study Guide to Toms, Coons, Mulattos, Mammies, and Bucks in American Film by Donald Bogle" (2011). *Research Papers*. Paper 66. http://opensiuc.lib.siu.edu/gs_rp/66/. Donald Bogle. *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films* (Oxford: Roundhouse, 1994), 7-8.

⁶¹ I am using the literary trope of Tragic Mulatto, which normally refers to a man or woman of mixed race to describe the peculiar relationship of a black woman to three variables, herself, (black) men, other (white) women, and how the black woman's identity is strained to satisfy all of these categories at once. Sapphire and Aunt Jemima Yvonne D. Sims, *Women of Blaxploitation* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2006): 7.

sexually insatiable, and the nurturing maid. She was the antithesis of the white women of the house.⁶²

Killer of Sheep situated the trope characters in clearly negative roles, which illuminate how normal and positive the lead character Stan is. Examples of the allusions to Blaxploitation trope are the characters who wear leather jackets (burglars, murderers), and the drunks who hang around the liquor store. Like Addison Gayle, Burnett saw the use of tropes in Blaxploitation as irresponsible uses of cinematic freedom in the portrayal of blackness. If Burnett had joined his film school contemporaries like Lucas, Kubrick, and Spielberg in their content, then he would have taken a fantasy role for his characters; however, Burnett took his responsibility as a black filmmaker seriously, and his whole film focused on realistic interpretations and depictions of *his* people, and the real lives that they lived and suffered through.

It seems that Burnett was guided by the statements made by the anti-Blaxploitation critics, such as Addison Gayle and Junius Griffin, because his film employs the freedom of responsibility to tell a true story complete with morality. Burnett uses his freedom of creation not to exploit blackness, but to humanize it through ordinariness. Yet throughout this ordinariness, black womanhood remains defined in a domestic sense without depth to the characters, other than their longing for physical connection and nurturing, despite black manhood being given great depth and complexity in the film. Black men are offered methods of transformation from being ordinary to altering their states into something valued by men and society (employment and the option to decide his fate). Women steadfastly embodied the stereotypes and tropes of

⁶² Marlon T. Riggs, *Ethnic Notions*. (Online Documentary). Berkeley: California Newsreel. 1987. <http://newsreel.org/video/ethnic-notions>.

African American women in film, even as black men grew out of their own limited cultural definitions.

In *Killer of Sheep*, Stan's wife is the 'every mama', as well as the tragic figure, because while Stan can escape his blues by finding another job, probably the one offered by Jerri, the wife is fixed in her position, longing to remain in her role while Stan forbids the title of Madea to his wife. In this film, the wives do not appear to want anything more from their lives than the ordinary, even though by the time of filming, black women were playing major roles in completely altering the meaning of equality, justice, and the black family dynamics through their activism and strong-willed need to foster change in the world. Despite black women organizing whole communities toward economic, civil, and personal progressive change, in the fantasy realm they remained in the very positions that motivated many of them to act in the first place. Stan's wife is as happy with her captivity inside the home as pre-Blaxploitation black women's characters are, and as happy as black tropes made slaves look, grateful for the kindness of man.

Part Six: Civil Rights/ Black Power Movements (Gender/Race)

Yvonne Sim's observation that, "popular culture offers a fascinating glimpse of attitudes and perceptions about black masculinity and femininity," becomes apparent when we put films such as *Killer of Sheep* in their historical contexts.⁶³ The Civil Rights Movement is popularly understood as defined by the Voting Rights Act, Martin Luther King and his assassination, and both radical and non-radical activism, all of which is culturally assumed to have been conducted and propelled by black men (despite the use of female activists as icons, such as Rosa Parks). The recent interdisciplinary focus on Black feminist studies has brought the roles of black women into the forefront and highlighted the importance of their efforts. This examination necessarily extends beyond contemporary popular culture, looking back to what shaped and informed these popular ideas, tropes, and assumptions.

Slavery left black people emancipated from the literal shackles of white America while they remained burdened mentally, socially, and economically, with many of the same issues they faced while forced to endure slavery. After the Civil War, life did not change significantly for blacks in America. Black men found it difficult to find and remain employed in a socio-economic system designed to ensure that white workers did not feel like white slaves, Negroes, and worse, equals to their black co-workers. The culturally signifying identities of black genders are constructed on a long history of capitalism and racism. David R. Roediger investigates the relationship of freeman (works and artisans) and slaves and suggests that, "(the term) *Freeman* continued to carry the double meaning of economic and political independence. Webster's 1892 dictionary gave as its first definition of *freeman* 'one who enjoys liberty ... one not a slave or a vassal',

⁶³ Yvonne D. Sims, *Women of Blaxploitation* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2006): 7.

and as its second ‘one who enjoys or is entitled to a franchise’.” He adds that, “Blackness meanwhile almost perfectly predicted lack of the attributes of a freeman... The very powerlessness of free Blacks made them not only easy but, in republican terms, appropriate and logical victims of the popular masses of white freemen.”⁶⁴ Black Americans, then, while technically free, were unwilling participants in an economic system that rendered unequal and subordinated to their white counterparts. Francis M. Beal describes the union of capitalism and racism as a system which was aimed at, “destroying the black race’s will to resist its subjugation, capitalism found it necessary to create a situation where the black man found it impossible to find meaningful or productive employment.”⁶⁵ Capitalism enforced the social construct of race and determined the cultural value of people, both white and black. The black body was, itself, an agent, or perhaps more appropriately a victimized anchor, of capitalism as “raising” slaves was even more profitable than agricultural pursuits, such as growing tobacco. African American workers physically produced the masters’ capitol, but the masters were the effectual laborers, for better or worse.⁶⁶ Therefore, the attitudes of productivity as workers, having evolved with the definitions of race, have served historically to demean the value of black work and the attitudes of the worker.

During World War II, despite wartime nationalism and calls for national unity in resisting opposing global forces, the United States wrestled with its own race relations. Racial prejudice and discrimination continued as did the black freedom struggle. Black men fought and died

⁶⁴ David R. Roediger, *Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (New York: Verso Books, 2007). Pages 33-56.

⁶⁵ Frances M. Beal, “Double Jeopardy: To be Black and Female,” *Meridians: Feminism, Race, Transnationalism* 8, no. 2 (Fall 2008): 166-76, accessed November 15, 2015. http://intellhisblackamerica.voices.wooster.edu/files/2012/03/Frances-Beale_Double-Jeopardy-To-Be-Black-and-Female1.pdf. Originally published by Beal in 1969 as an essay and later revised as a part of the “Sisterhood is Powerful” anthology of 1970, and reprinted again in 2008.

⁶⁶ David R. Roediger, *Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (New York: Verso Books, 2007).

alongside their white counterparts, wearing the same uniform as men who saw them as unequal soldiers; many white men would return to the States with their racial biases untouched by the camaraderie of the battlefield and service. After World War II, the working class' structure shifted to include more black women working than black men. Black women worked in white households, and more black men relied on the meager wages of black women who worked in white homes to provide for their families.⁶⁷ After the end of the Second World War in 1945, many black men returned home embittered at the lack of progress after their sacrifices and began to organize to fight for change. Although most black people felt voiceless and sought change, the movements for black representation and black power were unabashedly unsympathetic to women's argument for gender equality (especially within the black movements). The movement for equality, which relied on women for ideas and organizing, support and strength, overlooked women in lieu of black, male equality. While seemingly unfair, women providing support for a movement that effectively excludes them is almost virtually unchanged from the black woman's historical role: supporter of the patriarchy. The similarities between these movements and those of abolition must be noted, as once again, women supported and propelled the movement with little to no attention given to their lack of rights, which paved the way for the first wave of feminism and suffrage.

Black women worked as maids to support their households while continuing to perform the same duties in their own homes for black men who felt emasculated because women were the ones bringing home the money to support the family.⁶⁸ A feeling of emasculation emanated

⁶⁷ Jacqueline Jones. *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family from Slavery to the Present*. New York: Basic Books, 1985. 2. 155-165.

⁶⁸ Terry, "Towards the Gendering", 87, in re emasculation.

from black men, many of which believed that black women held an equal part in their oppression to whites. As Frances M. Beal stated it in 1969, “Certain black men are maintaining that they have been castrated by society but that black women somehow escaped this persecution and even contributed to this emasculation”.⁶⁹ The misinterpretation of complicity with white oppressive means ignored the truth that women were economically exploited through unfair wages and a general underappreciation for their efforts, both domestically and civilly. Black women were not just domestics and nurturers, they were champions of their communities who were, for all intents and purposes, the equivalent of “slaves of slaves” regardless of their social class.⁷⁰ The capitalist, racist structure of America had equated manhood with owning expensive cars, dressing flashy, and owning wealth. Unfortunately, according to Beal, “Many black women tended to accept the capitalist evaluation of manhood and womanhood and believed, in fact, that black men were shiftless and lazy, otherwise they would get a job and support their families as they ought to”.⁷¹ Despite the disparity between what black genders actually were, and how black genders were perceived and directed upon internally and by popular culture, women became some of the most important figures of the civil rights movement to fight for equality amongst races and genders after WWII.

The empowerment of black men through public visibility and recognition in the black freedom movement intentionally left women out of formal positions of authority and thus without equal power in their destinies.⁷² Women were on the frontlines of the racial struggle fighting for representation and power, but the patriarchal structure of the movements prevented

⁶⁹ Beal, 'Double Jeopardy', 166-176.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Terry, "Towards the Gendering", 79-105.

women from escaping intersectional marginalization. In fact, Stokely Carmichael once stated that, "The most powerful person in the struggle of the sixties was Miss Ella Baker, not Martin Luther King."⁷³ Activist groups, led by women like the great Ella Baker, formed in many communities to protest for equality, a show of force that would build the entire community and cultivate local leadership, and not just certain men who believed that the best services a woman could perform were those in domestic and secretarial roles for the rights movements.⁷⁴

Many black women later became icons and household names for their actions yet at the time few were able to secure positions of formal leadership within the civil rights organizations, and if a woman made it into a leadership position, her life was made difficult by the culture of the organization because of her gender. Famous examples of this include Elaine Brown, Angela Davis, Kathleen Cleaver, Assata Shakur, Barbara Easley, Charlotte Hill, and Tarika Matilaba. The visibility of black women in the rights movements did not earn them seats at the decision tables and certainly not at the podiums. In fact, there are quite a few black women who created change in government policies, laws, and community organization, and these women did not seek the power sought after by the mostly male Baptist preachers. Instead, women like Ella Baker are said to have been the most influential people of the Civil Rights Movement because she and others like Frances Beal, Septima Clark, and Pauli Murray opted for progress of all

⁷³ Marilyn Bordwell DeLaure, "Planting Seeds of Change: Ella Baker's Radical Rhetoric." *Women's Studies in Communication* 31, no. 1 (Spring 2008): 1-28, accessed August 10, 2015, doi:10.1080/07491409.2008.10162520.

⁷⁴ Baker and King, beyond the obvious differences like gender and cultural popularity differed in methodology, and organizational styles. Baker, one of King's biggest critics, preferred to empower everyone, regardless of race and gender, and she preferred to not be a figurehead insisting that the collective empowerment act on its own. King willingly took the position as a clear leader of the civil rights movement with his voice representing the beliefs of a group.

genders and races to have equal rights, equal opportunities, and equal voices in their communities.⁷⁵

During one of the major moments in the rights movements, The March on Washington, women fought for seats on the stage alongside their male colleagues to recognize and voice their concerns on the male platform. Women were expected to be sated, because although they would have no voice on the stage speaking of their rights, they would have a well-known, female gospel singer performing.⁷⁶ Somehow, this performance of religious songs was deemed an adequate substitute for the powerful and instrumental Black female voices. The only black female voice sang and did not speak a word of civil or women's rights.⁷⁷ Black women often accepted these terms because they understood that their fight for women's rights could only be achieved under the bigger platform of the Black rights movement, and through community organization which acknowledged all people, allowing a pure democracy in the leadership of young activists.

The major rights movements depended on men who, due to their charisma, became figure heads of entire movements of people. A major critical insight of many scholars of African American women during the Civil Rights movement was that men like Martin Luther King Jr., who rose to power via his charismatic oratory skills, devoted more energy to being the face of a movement, seeing themselves *as* the movement, rather than fighting for the true purpose and

⁷⁵ Beal, "Double Jeopardy", 166-76. Mittie K. Carey. "The Parallel Rhetorics of Ella Baker." *The Southern Communication Journal* 79, no. 1 (2014): 27-40, (accessed November 15, 2015). Doi: 10.1080/1041794X.2013.847478. Barbara Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 496, eBook Collection (EBSCOhost), EBSCOhost, accessed November 15, 2015. Anthony B. Pinn, "Pauli Murray's Triadic Strategy of Engagement," *Journal Of Feminist Studies In Religion* 29, no. 1 (Spring 2013): 160-164, Project MUSE, EBSCOhost (accessed November 15, 2015), doi: 10.2979/jfemistudreli.29.1.160. 160-164

⁷⁶ History.Com Staff, "Mahalia Jackson, The Queen of Gospel, Puts Her Stamp on the March on Washington." History.com. 2009. <http://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/mahalia-jackson-the-queen-of-gospel-puts-her-stamp-on-the-march-on-washington>.

⁷⁷ Terry, "Towards the Gendering", 79-105.

cause for which they originally organized. Black women were leaders in many ways, and many simply elected to create change outside of the limelight. These women not only focused on women's rights, they also sought justice for gender and race inequalities, and queer rights as well.

The civil rights and Black power movements were seen both internally and by the nation as the product of maleness, and the women supported and protected these social movements, performing supportive roles and, often, providing the necessary locomotion and organization for the larger movement, understanding that they would likely receive little to no recognition for their efforts. During this period of time, the feminist movement was also emerging, but just as the black activism movements for black men, women's rights were separate from black women's rights. In the early 1970s when women's rights came to the forefront and the explosion of feminism hit America, there was still a familiar split among white and black women, which caused black female allegiance to form much slower than that of the whites.⁷⁸ Black women were *othered* in almost every rights movement in which they participated.

Black feminism was accepted (with some exceptions) by many black women to be a secondary cause to the larger movement of black people as a whole. This discrepancy is perfectly illustrated in *Killer of Sheep* when Wife stands up to Smoke and Scooter. She was upset about the audacity of the men to disrespect her by trying to restrain her and hush her, but above all (according to tradition of domesticity roles), she argues for the respect of her man, Stan, and also for the men with whom she argues against. As a black woman, her duty was to protect the black

⁷⁸ Black women were excluded from the public image of the suffrage movement, and "Kathleen Cleaver, a former Panther, notes the ways in which a liberation struggle for Black women was not served by the type of consciousness raisings and other strategies that appealed to white women" Terry, "Towards the Gendering", 88.

men from themselves regardless of whether it put her in immediate harm of the men, and Stan did nothing to prevent the men from physically distancing her from themselves as she became confrontational. Because progress of the black community is remembered as a men's issue, then the failure of the movement is seen as the black man's failure.

Black women, feminism, human rights: Veil, Gaze, and Oppression (invisibility)

Within social margins, black people live masked lives beneath a white, cis-gendered, heterosexual patriarchy. To be masked means that there are elements of the person or persons that remains hidden beneath the surface, not visible to the 'naked eye' of the beholder. In essence, to be black is to live within a constant masquerade. If a black person dons the appropriate mask to effectively negotiate the identifying element of themselves that obscures them as the "other," then they are rewarded with visibility, with a voice in society. Gwendolyn A. Foster provides a clear explanation of the veil's relationship with the imprisonment of identity when she states that the veil should be viewed, "as a multifaceted representation of the scopic (the visual) and the haptic (the corporeal) knowledge invested in the overloaded signifier of the veil ... [it] is at once a shifting signifier that moves between signifying captivity (in patriarchal hegemonic discourse) and freedom (as a liberated speaking subject)".⁷⁹ The veil acts as a screen allowing a space for negotiation of the representation of identity.⁸⁰ These negotiations of power are constantly at work among members of any group because of discourse and cultural hierarchies, and for marginalized populations, the freedom to negotiate the veil is burdened by the lack of power. Even with the black race, male supremacy oppresses the black women's voice.

⁷⁹ Gwendolyn Audrey Foster, *Women Filmmakers of the African & Asian Diaspora: Decolonizing the Gaze, Locating Subjectivity* (Carbondale: SIU Press, May 1, 1997), accessed November 20, 2015, doi:10.2307/1213261.

⁸⁰ Véronique Voruz, and Bogdan Wolf, *The Later Lacan: An Introduction* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007), 186, accessed August 17, 2015.

<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&scope=site&db=nlebk&db=nlabk&AN=193049>.

So, to the extent that black women were visible making empowering speeches, and put forth as the poster children of injustice (Rosa Parks, Ruby Bridges, four black school girls 1963 church bombing), they were only as such within the limits of patriarchal power. The women remained the symbol for manhood's vessel to progress. Women's duty to the fight for equality and social empowerment was overshadowed in merit by the "rhetoric of liberation...through hierarchical organizations denominated by men".⁸¹ Black women's purpose had been constructed as one that existed to better men by supporting men in their endeavors, and transforming weak boys into strong men merely by allowing sexual access to their female bodies. So, women were a route of transformation and a site from which men could gain power but despite the female's participation in the sexual act, she herself remained a marginalized commodity.

A resurrection of Victorian ideals after WWII spawned unrealistic cultural goals, such as aspiring to be good mothers and wives while being little else. Frances Beal explains that, "most black women have to work to help house, feed, and clothe their families. Black women make up a substantial percentage of the black working force and this is true for the poorest black family as well as the so-called "middleclass" family."⁸² By the 1970s, feminism was emerging but the voices emerging from it were for white women, and many black women still had not found a space for voicing their displeasure with their historical sexploitation and cultural pigeon holing. bell hooks writes of a young black girl who was ashamed of her black skin, had straightened her curly, kinky hair and was filled with rage, yet had no way to express her rage or her pleasure,

"She was angry. And yet her anger had no voice. It could not say, 'Mommy, I am upset that all these years from babyhood on, I thought that I was a marvelous, beautiful gifted girl, only to discover that the world does not see me this way'...And it struck me that for

⁸¹ Terry, "Towards the Gendering", 87.

⁸² Beal, "Double Jeopardy", 166.

black people, the pain of learning that we cannot control our images, how we see ourselves (if our vision is not decolonized), or how we are seen is so intense that it rends us. It rips us and tears at the seams of our efforts to construct self and identity. Often it leaves us ravaged by repressed rage, feeling weary, dispirited, and sometimes just plain old brokenhearted. These are the gaps in our psyche that are the spaces where mindless complicity, self-destructive rage, hatred, and paralyzing despair enter.”⁸³

The focus of the female gaze is conspicuous once it is discovered in *Killer of Sheep*.

Angela, Stan’s daughter, is allowed direct gazes into the conversations between adult men as long as she stands in the background, sometimes masked by a physical mask or through dutifully parroting the domesticity of her mother. In scenes with Stan’s (unnamed) wife, the wife’s speaking parts are typically punctuated by looking at the daughter. In this film, the female gaze is less oppositional than it is boldly observational, simply something that occurs; the women watch over the men to keep them out of harm’s way or for the men’s well-being, and to take care of the children. Yet as bell hooks stated in *The Oppositional Gaze*, “By courageously looking, we defiantly declared: ‘Not only will I stare. I want my look to change reality’. Even in the worst circumstances of domination, the ability to manipulate one’s gaze in the face of structures of domination that would contain it, opens up the possibility of agency”.⁸⁴ It is worth noting that females in this film can boldly look, just like women could boldly march and yell, but that does not mean that they have any power. Angela is only scolded for gazing into the world of men and boys by her mother in one scene as the girl stands in the recess of the yard watching adult men talk about money and problems. Her mother, through a window in which she was perhaps sneaking a gaze into the men’s world, yells at the girl to come inside the house and stay out of grown people’s conversations.

⁸³ bell hooks. *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992), 115-31, accessed September 23, 2015, <http://www.umass.edu/afroam/downloads/reading14.pdf>.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 117.

The remarkable aspect of Burnett's treatment of the young, black girl is that Angela's gaze through the mask is uninterrupted. Angela's gaze is not odd and it does not draw attention. She is free to stare and observe the private conversation where her father speaks of his life of dread. Later, she stands in the background of her parents' awkward conversations about their romantic lives, her father's sadness, and almost every aspect of her father and brothers' lives with little interruption in her pastime. Angela appears to have an uncensored ability to examine life in scenes throughout the film; her gaze is limited only by the presence and direction of her mother, and she is the alleged inhibitor of her brother who sought his toy gun while trying to come up with money. She is also the first person that Stan focuses his love and affection on in the film.

Again, her gaze is only broken by the voice of the very woman who should be a role model, and she stares blankly at a male playmate in the beginning, possibly to show the dissonance or the separation of black boys and girls and men and women.⁸⁵ Angela stares in order to change her parents' relationship to a healthy one, to make her father happy, to encourage her brother to be obedient and nonviolent, to make a silent peace with her playmate, to change her circumstances. Angela's identity is forming through her life as a child of Watts, and through cultural markers of what she should aspire to be when she becomes a black woman, her uninterrupted gaze signifying the unchanging pattern of black girl-womanhood. Angela watches intently in every scene the elements of blackness that will define her life, cultural expectations of her in a domesticated position relating to males in her life: she dutifully clears the table of her and her brother's dishes after a meal, brings her brother drinks, rubs her father's weary shoulders, prevents her brother from getting into trouble by hiding his pellet gun, and serves as a

⁸⁵ After the mother delivers her monologue following the slow dance with Stan, she concludes her speech by grabbing up Angela's infant shoes from the dresser and holding them to her breast. This signifies that the generational lack of belonging will continue with her daughter as well.

silent accompaniment to her male friend who beckons her through whistling as though she were a dog and she at the same time wears a dog-face mask.

In another interpretation of black girlhood, girls are shown as instigators of violence. The idea that black women were equally to blame with whites for the castration of black men is essentially played out in the scene when the group of adolescent girls swarm a young boy, insult him, and pull his bicycle apart. This is the scene as it appears on the surface, but a further analysis of this scene reveal that the male rides alone into an alleyway where a group of girls are at play, he insults them, and the girls in turn stand up for themselves by hurling insults back at him and most importantly disarming and perverting his mode of transportation. His bike can be seen as his progress, his mobility. Once on his way to someplace beyond the girls, he now retreats broken and dispirited, toward the direction from which he came, his wheel-less bike now in the hands of the girls. The group of girls literally stop his progress to stand up for themselves, leaving him in the past position, paralleling reality with women fighting for their rights and black men constantly at odds with both women and a fight for equality in the world beyond the apron of black women. Perhaps in lieu of sexual passageway to manhood, this is why the group of boys, in a later scene before the sheep are slaughtered, creep from the underskirts of an old, white building, see a young girl in a white dress hanging white laundry on the line, and attack her with dirt clods. She stands there expressionless, taking the assault without word. She receives the punishment of black manhood because she represents that which oppresses them, and the real progress of black women seen in the world goes unseen within the film itself. Black women in this film are as content with their status in life as the Tom was supposedly in his.

Stan's wife is nameless throughout the film; her name is simply her label, Wife. Her name identity becomes intertwined with her function as his property, and she is subordinated through being distinguished only by her role and function.⁸⁶ Wife spends a majority of her screen time gazing, be it at her husband, daughter, the floor, herself, or off into the world beyond her screened window. In one particular scene, Wife is home alone with Angela while Stan is at work and Stan Jr. is out running the streets. Burnett shoots the wife in a personal, tight, close-up as she stares at the floor in thought, turns to the stove, and stares at herself in the lid's reflection. Because of her extended staring at the floor and her reflection, the audience can see that Wife essentially compares herself to that of a poorly tarred floor.

The one major identity of *Killer of Sheep* which goes unevolved beyond gender role and stereotypes is that of Wife. *Killer of Sheep* could also be a story about girlhood and womanhood in black America in addition to that of a sad, working-class, black man. There are by far more scenes with women in them behaving stereotypically than there are of black men doing anything for themselves without the advice, encouragement, or love of the women. Women and girls use their gazes and their marginalized spaces throughout the film to push the men to do and be better, regardless of their situations (ex. the crass, drunk women telling the drunk man to get his life together after he calls her a no-good woman). Also, the spectator is influenced by the treatment of women in this film simply by the lack of meaning given to women in the film, and thus society, as evidenced by the audience never being told the wife's name, despite her being the main supporter and defender of the lead character. She is a commodity for his consumption just as all women of Blaxploitation had been before and after Burnett's film.

⁸⁶ Stan's wife's name may have been Kaycee, the name of the actress, had anyone in the script ever addressed her.

Within the film, women like Wife and every single woman that she knows accept that their duties are to rear children and preen all day waiting for their husbands to come home working from a long day.⁸⁷ They remain subservient in their roles to their menfolk. The husbands, robbed of masculinity by their women and by their roles in society, have to fight to retain their lost masculinity through continuing to be the anti-trope. The message seems to be that a man's duty is noble, and it is admired by his faithful wife.

Men, being told that they were less than in society, and having felt that black women had participated in their castration, are redeemed in this movie, even as Burnett shows us Stan's femininity. Stan becomes a hostess to his pal, offering tea and coffee. At home and work he spends his time mute (powerless) and doing what are typed as womanly duties, cleaning and washing. His only power is exerted over his son's behavior, the spreading of his seed, which would "fulfill" his wife's dreams of motherhood, and his wife. He is to be honored because he is one of the black men who does not march in the streets because he thinks himself above his socio-economic class and because he does not desert his family physically; the Moynihan Report would suggest he is a rare, nonexistent, or dying breed of black man.⁸⁸

The wife, a contributor to his unhappiness due to his lack of manhood, is summarily punished by his refusal to allow her to romance him, thus putting her in a place beneath his own depression. She is the outlet and the unfortunate inferior target of his damaged esteem as a man. On the surface, *Killer of Sheep* seems to follow an array of moments in one man's life, but

⁸⁷ Excluding Jerri, a notable exception in that she does have power, which is seen in black men answering to her in their own sphere.

⁸⁸ Moynihan's research showed that, "Nearly a quarter of urban negro marriages are dissolved, nearly one-quarter of negro births are illegitimate, almost one-fourth of negro families are headed by females, and that (the lack of fathers) has led to a startling increase in welfare dependency". <http://www.dol.gov/oasam/programs/history/webid-meynihan.htm>.

through his life we are allowed to see his wife, who like many black women during the period, became a domestic slave, stripped of her emotions, stricken from herself along with any power she may have. In fact, in order for a woman to possess true power to direct or inform men in this film, she must be white, or socially and morally bankrupt.⁸⁹

Neorealistic films effortlessly mirror the real world. This documentary-like feel allowed *Killer of Sheep* to challenge the stereotypes presented in films which previously featured black casts. Burnett sought to address the inaccurate portrayal of black people in cinema who were usually depicted as derelicts, drug pushers, criminals, and prostitutes. *Killer of Sheep* attempted to establish a realm in which the truth of blackness could be viewed by the audience, encouraging multiple levels of understanding in their comprehension and interpretations of black people. Unfortunately, Burnett offered a romanticized adaptation of his own past, depicting the Watts world in which he lived and grew up rather than an evolving world that included women longing to escape the prisons of their husband's shadows and domestic life. Burnett's empowerment of black men and his portrayal of black women in their customary domestic positions shows that Burnett, as a black, natal southerner in his thirties, saw the world much like the black male leaders of the Civil Rights Movements. That is to say that he, as a filmmaker, could not escape his prejudices as a black man, because although he sought to revitalize how people like him were seen, he nurtured the pigeon hole that had been carved for black women by characters like Mammy and Sapphire. As an artist, Burnett formed what he believed was a true reconstruction of life in Watts, a town which actually goes unspecified in the film, and as such

⁸⁹ For example, the sister in law who flirts with her sister's beaten husband at Sybil's, the two alcoholic women who have unlashd tongues against their male counterpart, Jerri who controls the flow of money in the neighborhood and is thus a controller of not just the man trying to cash his check on her whim, but who also retains control over his family, dictating whether or not they will eat and have a roof over their heads.

serves as an “anytown, U.S.A.”. In many black men’s eyes, black women existed in a world in which they relied on the same roles that they had existed in for centuries, never seeing how this characterization was problematic, as he and others saw the complicated display of black manhood. Frances Beal explains why the existence as housewife and domestic is truly problematic when she writes that:

A woman who stays at home, caring for children and the house, often leads an extremely sterile existence. She must lead her entire life as a satellite to her mate. He goes out into society and brings back a little piece of the world for her. His interests and his understanding of the world become her own and she cannot develop herself as an individual, having been reduced to only a biological function. This kind of woman leads a parasitic existence,” and a “parasitic existence” is hardly one that screams revolutionary or humanistic because a woman’s life is consumed with the domestic sphere.⁹⁰

This voiceless, parasitic existence that Beal discusses is seen throughout *Killer of Sheep*. For example, the young, disabled girl in the movie presents her pregnancy only after Stan finally takes a nap (on his wife’s shoulder) and he engages his wife in conversation and his revelation that he needs a new job, which is the key to his depressive state. He touches her leg, which is, of course, an act of intimacy. These scenes clearly reveal the vessel-like nature of women as depicted in Burnett’s film: their (re)actions only come as a response to the men in their lives. Wife is leaned on, Wife is spoken to, Wife is touched, and Wife is confided in. She does not initiate action; rather, she is a parasitic backdrop to Stan’s active existence.

How exactly Stan (and by extension, the other men in the film) contain the women in their lives, is disturbingly revealed throughout Burnett’s film. Stan strips Wife of everything that makes her human, feminine, or unique, reducing her to her domestic and biological functions.

⁹⁰ Beal, “Double Jeopardy”, 166.

By keeping Wife unhappy, unloved, and even removing her pet name from the lexicon of his adolescent son, he effectively imprisons her beneath his prison, even when he no longer feels the burden of his melancholic oppression.

Wife never uses her voice to tell Stan that she is unhappy; instead, she passively reveals her unhappiness with confessions to the camera and silent glances from the floor to her reflection. This clearly shows that even she believes that she is beneath him, subordinate to her husband, equal to the floor, a surface at which her husband constantly carves away and replaces, possibly until all traces of the original flooring have disappeared. She is not to aspire to be more than her prescribed roles as mother, wife, and nag. Her sorrow appears because she misses her supposed pinnacle of womanhood, pregnancy (clutching the baby shoes to her breast after her sad confession to herself).

The women in *Killer of Sheep* are happiest when they are overseeing happy black men, tying their emotional state to their functions. Wife's life goals seem to be situated in the domestic sphere: how many children she can have and how content she can make her husband through his social reputation, his employment decisions, meeting his sexual and beautification needs of her body. These goals say a great deal about who this film is intended to present as a revolutionized person, and that is definitely not the black woman. Frances Beal wrote that a grave disservice is done to black women by anyone who honestly believes that the most important goal that a black woman can have centers on birthing black babies for black men. By believing that childbirth and motherhood are the best ways for black women to contribute to the black community, the historical precedents and contributions of women like "Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, Ida B. Wells-Barnett, Mary McLeod Bethune, and Fannie Lou Hamer, to name

but a few” are completely negated.⁹¹ Stan’s wife’s only commitment appears to be in this unjust role of negation of women’s progress and is unequivocal evidence that *Killer of Sheep* does not offer a remedy for black women in film, but instead retains an imperfect ideal that is not entirely reflective of 1970s America for them.

⁹¹ Ibid.

Part Seven: Killer of Sheep

Challenge and Response

Burnett's work went against the stereotype that Mario Van Peebles, Gordon Parks, and countless other low-budget directors perpetuated when he developed a film identity or representation of the black man. Stan was simply a regular, struggling man, unlike what contemporary black characters represented. At the time, Hollywood's black characters focused on the sensational and extraordinary, offering a pin-hole view of various strata of society (often urban). Charles Burnett's male characters, on the other hand, are mimetic by nature of being neo-realistic, which theoretically portrays life and people as they are. His film, then, is a more reliable source than the troped tale of a wronged drug lord in the romanticized ghetto, and offers a more conceivable manner with which to view the inescapable virtues of human performance in culture and the substantial matters of life, especially when the lives under scrutiny are those of marginalized people.

Blaxploitation, as black power's comically reduced and amplified mirror, arched its way into pop culture via black film, and the fantasy of blackness portrayed in film gave way to representation. Fantasy is, as Lacan states, "the locus of mediation between the man and the woman", and despite the revolutionary qualities of Blaxploitation, representation had not fully emerged for the black man and certainly not the black woman until Burnett's *Killer of Sheep* presented a different way of knowing for the black race on screen.⁹² In *Sheep*, when arguing with the thugs, the wife makes decisive arguments for the betterment of her family and also aims to enlighten her husband's pals so that they can see beyond the glitter and excess of the

⁹² Véronique Voruz, and Bogdan Wolf, *The Later Lacan*, 186.

Blaxploitation rhetoric, putting their energies toward being *real* men with goals of bettering their people, versus their supposed empowerment through material status.

One of the most significant examples of the wife temporarily removing her veil as silent homemaker is when she physically uncloaks herself from behind the screen after eavesdropping (trope) on the men's conversation, as Angela had done with her father and his friends earlier, about a murder scheme. Wife steps forward in the role of both aid and liberator when she declares the actions of the hoodlums to be those of bush-beating savages, and not those of modern men.⁹³ She effectively educates the men on how to properly *be* men and momentarily eclipses her role as a silent novelty. As swiftly as she presents her limited power, she returns to her position of intersectionality within the female gaze; she literally goes from standing in front of her husband and challenging his peers to standing back behind him on the stoop. Her gaze is resumed, and consequently as is her position in society, when her husband, Stan, scolds Stan Jr. for referring to Wife as "Madea," because Stan feels that term is a relic of the (mystical) southern (country) past.

While Stan rejects their shared southern heritage and cultural roots, the wife clings to this past with a bitter, tender nostalgia, longing for the comfort and familiarity of her pre-migration upbringing, even referring to her matriarchy as Madea, but only within the uninterrupted and therefore private sphere of her husband's absence. In Stan's presence, when he makes the remark to his son about the pet-name, Wife simply looks down and away from the two with a look of disappointment on her face, but she does not show the same passion for her identity that she displayed for that of her husband and his friends.

⁹³ Their actions are, of course, tropes of the coon figure mirrored in Blaxploitation

Gender roles within the black community designated that women's jobs were to serve as softeners of men. Wife and Angela's roles were essential in establishing Stan as compassionate and vulnerable. Blaxploitation, tropes, and black nationalism's campaign to empower black men by making them appear strong through hyperbolizing power had to be negated in order to present them as nurturing and caring. It was the female characters, through relation to the men, who created an image that was now capable of vulnerability and concern for more than his ego. The black male ego and its effect on black women was based on culturally accepted expectations of gender within the black community. To understand this, a brief discussion of gender roles must be understood. Genders within the black community suffer a division that Mia Mask refers to as a "culture of domesticity".⁹⁴ Within this culture, roles for men and women (and thus boys and girls) are defined by the expectations of manhood and its function to protect, provide for, and perform the labor occupations outside of the home.

Conversely, however, women's roles were to occupy positions related in some way to housework, both within the home and out, even if that position was in the Black Panther Party.⁹⁵ In *Killer of Sheep*, Stan works as a cleaner and herder in a slaughterhouse while his wife stays at home with their daughter Angela. Stan is shown numerous times throughout the film either crouching or literally down on all-fours scrubbing away at blackness. His sorrowful life is measured in the riffs of blues and jazz music as he struggles with depression while breaking his back in a job that makes him miserable. Arguably, Stan's employment as a cleaner at the slaughterhouse, his hospitality to Bracy by offering him tea, and his spouse sticking up for his

⁹⁴ Mask, *Contemporary Black American Cinema*, 13.

⁹⁵ Examples include food pantries, clothing and shoe drives, community breakfasts, and daycare/child education programs. Robyn Ceanne Spencer, "Engendering the Black Freedom Struggle: Revolutionary Black Womanhood and the Black Panther Party in the Bay Area, California." *Journal of Women's History* 20, no. 1 (Spring 2008): 90-113. 10.1353/jowh.2008.0006.

manhood are elements of domesticity and perhaps another element used to subconsciously soften Stan. In comparison to Stan's manly work outside the home, Wife spends her time primarily consumed with the stereotypical qualities of domestication: cleaning, mothering, and most telling, 'dolling herself up' for her husband's return from work, and cooking. When Wife is not looking at Stan or Angela, she is occupying herself with unspoken thought, as her character spends her time waiting for acknowledgement, conversation, and intimacy. The woman's roles serve to humanize what Blaxploitation had carved out as brutish black men, yet had left women such as Wife as static characters whose jobs it was to wait in the dark until the men brought light into their lives, like the tin man awaiting oil to come alive.

When young Angela stands within earshot of her father and his friends, who are having a frank discussion about their lives, the mother yells from a window feet away from the girl telling her to stop listening to the men talk. This remarkable scene becomes doubly important when the viewer considers that before the girl arrived, Wife was there, sitting in a dark, screened window listening to this same conversation. Wife is not a part of this conversation because this is a discussion of economic standing, during which Stan defends his position as not poor (because he can afford to donate things) and that he and Eugene plan to spend Stan's small paycheck on a car motor. The Wife waits for, and is denied recognition (input/power) throughout the film. For example, when she enters the kitchen while Stan and Bracy chat over tea, Stan looks at her and back to his checkers, and Bracy winks at her. Additionally, she consistently attempts to engage Stan romantically and conversationally, and is rejected. Finally, when she is frustrated, she does so "as a lady," or, in other words, to herself.

While *Killer of Sheep* does not directly confront the intimacy or the operating relationships between white and black workers, throughout the several vignettes Burnett shows a lack of whiteness except in the cases where the whites are in positions of economic authority. Examples include the shots inside of the slaughterhouse when the audience is shown a glimpse into the tragedy of Stan's work life, and are subtly shown that the subject of this film is a slaughterhouse employee who does not have the power to actually dispatch anything. Instead Stan dutifully cleans up after the white butchers and workers, indicating his lack of manhood as he cleans and scrubs while the men perform acts of violence. When Stan has to allow Jerri, a white liquor store owner, to touch him because Jerri controls his socioeconomic position by deciding whether or not she will cash Stan's paycheck, which contrasts with his having deprived his wife of this access just one scene prior, and continuing to do so until near the end of the film. So, without drawing attention to racial divides in the film, Burnett still inputs enough devices in the film to cause the viewer to remember racism's effects on the characters' lives.

In *Killer of Sheep*, Wife's voice is removed through her invisibility as a full person, which suggests that Burnett actually regressed the black female in film to something that predates the mammy figure. The situational robbing of voice from Wife is perfectly typified in the scene following her challenging argument with Smoke and Scooter. It is as if every time she inserts herself into man's world, she is taken back down a peg personally, and to a lesser degree, socially. Furthermore, she aggressively and femininely attempts several times to secure Stan's affections, but is blatantly ignored with him literally walking off as though he has been dancing, leaving her spinning in slow circles as if in a drain, all alone. She occupies the position of child, in the sense that she is to be seen and not heard. She steals her glances and uses her voice in the

same way that hooks described the oppositional gaze, so Wife, in a way, has an oppositional voice against that which prevents her from being loved, and that which threatens to disturb what little she does actually have control over. While Stan and his pals are allowed to openly vent, the women, with the exception of the mammy-like figures and the seductress sister-in-law of his friend, do not get to exercise the same right. Wife is so heartbroken at her inability to successfully fulfill her role as a good wife (romantically, keeping the children in line, and possibly of having more children) that she wrings her fists in the air in despair as Stan leaves the room after half-heartedly sharing a dance with her, going into a solitary confession.

The confession shows how true her loneliness is and that she does not have a resource with which to share her feelings about *her* wants and pain. Instead, the only time that she stands up for anyone's feelings and well-being is when she literally steps out of the darkened house, temporarily removing herself from the domesticated position by coming out of the shadows of the mask/door screen, walking past her seated husband to the two men who stand before him challenging his manhood in regards to not wanting to commit a crime. She "mans" up to these guys and sets them straight, defending the manhood of black men, and thus her husband, fighting for even their respect as black men, and once done, she returns to her position behind her seated husband. He remains in his seated position on the steps, but she stands behind him. When wife hides in plain view behind the porch screen and listens to the conversation between her unwilling husband and the two thugs, she is in her traditional, societal "place," but when she chooses to act and bare herself, she does so with all the aggressiveness and fortuity that her husband lacks in the moment. The men physically restrain her when she moves too close to them, to the truth of their manhood, and Stan does nothing to stop them. In fact, Stan has nothing to say after or during the

incident until the next scene when the whole family is outdoors. This time, Wife scolds Angela about not having shoes on outside—connected to the girl’s health and the mother’s inability to afford a doctor. Stan Jr. turns to Wife and asks for a dollar, then Stan decides to challenge a spectacle of manhood, a version of himself, his son. Stan yells at the boy who has just endearingly referred to his mother is Mot dear, and Stan chastises for the boy for speaking “country”. This marks the resignation back in to her interior as the wife crosses her arms and looks ponderously sad.

It is important to acknowledge that Wife’s voice is only made apparent to others when she is wrestling with the issues of others whom she is in the position to nurture (children and men), just as the roles of activist and domesticated women’s roles had done for real-life women. When women express joy in *Killer of Sheep*, or any emotion aside from frustration or anger, such as actual happiness, contentment, private thoughts, and anything for themselves, it is done in an empty room or in an aside space with only other women present. Comparatively, Stan, Eugene, and Bracy openly discuss depression, unemployment, money (and lack thereof), and occasionally, love. In Burnett’s film, the wife’s dignity is in her domestication and pride of motherhood. She seeks physical relations from her husband in almost every scene but is rejected in all but one scene in which he places his hand on her leg. She continues in the stereotypical role of domestic, nurturer, and faithful wife. We are, however, afforded a glimpse into her inner feelings, unlike many of the films preceding *Killer of Sheep*.

The audience is also shown an intimate view of Wife’s alienation and relegation into the margins. At the beginning of the week, Stan works at the slaughterhouse and then sits silently at home, staring into the distance, as if looking through his wife as she talks to him. The

slaughterhouse and his home blur into one place for him. On Thursday, Stan and his wife dance, and he stiffly dances in distanced and hesitant movements, rebuffing each of her attempts, made with every step of their circular pattern, to gain intimacy with him until the song ends and he turns and silently walks away. It is in this moment that Burnett allows us to see how painful alienation is for Wife, and how careless Stan has become towards her. She is left pleading to his retreating silence, confessing her pain to an empty room, granting no one access to her psyche.

On Friday, Stan is fresh from work and at the height of his depression. Once Saturday comes, he, his wife, daughter, and friends go on a trip to the country, and his humanity returns in this vignette. He is able to relax and rest in the car, laying in the arms of his wife until the flat tire sends them back from the country to the projects. When they return home, Stan finally smiles and confides in his wife that he is ready to find a new job. Perhaps he will take Jerri up on the safe, back room job that she offered him, or perhaps he will strike out and find one of very few jobs remaining in the former industrial mecca of Los Angeles; those elements remain uncertain. He returns to work on Monday with a smile on his face, confident that life will be better, and the audience is left to understand that Wife's life will be vicariously more pleasant because Stan has made some peace with his struggle.

Conclusion

The "fear" of women that exists among many Black men runs deep and often goes unspoken. This fear is cultural. Most men are introduced to members of the opposite sex in a superficial manner, and seldom do we seek a more in depth or informed understanding of them ... Women have it rough all over the world. Men must become informed listeners.⁹⁶

Although its mark still lingers, Blaxploitation ended almost as abruptly as it began.⁹⁷

And just as the genre had caught the attention of social activists such as Junius Griffin, it also piqued the interest of filmmakers and students, such as the LA School, who counted among its ranks Charles Burnett, creator of *Killer of Sheep*. The LA Rebellion attempted to create socially-conscious films that would stand independent of current trends and filmmaking fads, as well as thoughtfully respond to larger social conversations, such as those about gender, race, and socio-economics. And despite Burnett's film receiving virtually no critical attention, the film still boasts much recognition, and many awards and accolades. Fortunately, now, some 30 years after its release, *Killer of Sheep* does exactly what the LA Rebellion had hoped for: it withstands fads and contributes to necessary, thoughtful, social conversations that are just as important and relevant today as they were in the late 1970s.

Killer of Sheep shows that black people were more than what the cheap Hollywood exploitation films had previously created as the dominating identity of blacks in America, such as pimps, prostitutes, drug dealers and violent sex maniacs, and at times, all of these combined.

⁹⁶ Haki R. Madhubuti, *Black Men: Obsolete, Single, Dangerous?: The African American Family in Transition* (Chicago: Third World Press, 1990), 181.

⁹⁷ Ed Guerrero, "The So-Called Fall Of Blaxploitation." *The Velvet Light Trap* 64, no. 1 (2009): 90-91, accessed October 10, 2015, doi:10.1353/vlt.0.0055. Guerrero states, "Certainly, by the mid-seventies the black cinema interlude (in Hollywood's parlance, a short term for quick profit, subgenre cycle), universally known as Blaxploitation, had reached its zenith in terms of popularity and number of films. From there, Blaxploitation went brain dead and was subsequently euthanized", 90.

Killer of Sheep holds a mirror up to nature, just as Hamlet said that good performances should, reflecting society back on itself through art.⁹⁸ This particular mirror reflects 1970s America, insisting that the audience contend with race and gender issues around them, issues that ran counter to what was depicted on the Blaxploitation screen. Burnett elegantly revealed the very intimate life of Stan, his family, and Watts, and while he challenged society's notions of black men, he, like so many of his filmmaking predecessors, effectively assigned women a role in a silent and domestic sphere. *Killer of Sheep* challenges stereotypes of black men, while perpetuating social attitudes toward black women.

Blaxploitation films were cash cows for production companies. It was also a genre that was supposed to elevate, celebrate, and encourage black men and women, finally depicting characters on the big screen with agency, as fighters, and in control of their destinies. This short-lived genre fell as quickly as it rose, though, for two reasons: audience awareness and production of other films. With films such as *Jaws* and *Star Wars*, movie companies realized that the real money was to be made in blockbusters, and they chose to divert their investments from Blaxploitation films to these larger, more merchandisable films. Also, audiences began to realize that those drug dealers, pimps, and violent persons on the screen did not represent the everyday black man and woman. The films' settings, characters, plots, dialogues, and storylines did not resonate with audiences after a while. The movies were inauthentic, which was problematic, because that was the very promise that had popularized the genre: that black men and women would finally see reasonable representations of themselves on the big screen with whom they

⁹⁸ Hamlet Act 3, Scene 3, 17-24: "Suit the action to the word, the word to the action, with this/ special observance, that you o'erstep not the modesty of/nature:/for any thing so o'erdone is from the purpose of playing,/whose/end, both at the first and now, was and is, to hold as 'twere/the/mirror up to nature? To show virtue her feature, scorn her/own/image, and the very age and body of the time his form and/pressure."

could identify, not mammies or Toms, but finally, characters who proudly stood in the forefront of the big screen rather than being subordinated into the margins as support for their white castmates.

Blaxploitation, as the name suggests, exploited black characters under pretenses of autonomy and agency. That is not to say, though, that the genre did not have positive effects or outcomes. For the first time, and almost as a logical and necessary response to the Civil Rights Movement, as well as feminist and other social movements, black men and women were on the big screen as central characters who were able to lead rather than respond, able to choose rather than be guided, and who were able to function independent of a white cohort. Blaxploitation complicated the relationship between Hollywood and moviegoers, and, unfortunately, helped shaped public perception about black men and women. Rather than art imitating life, life seemed to be affected by art. This was a dynamic and recursive relationship that, while short lived, had lasting ramifications. Perhaps the greatest legacy of the Blaxploitation genre is the dialogue that it encouraged and cultivated, about racial prejudice and discrimination, gender discrimination, and socio-economic issues, which necessarily followed and was informed by actual social issues happening in the world.

This dialogue was the key to Blaxploitation's demise, but also the forefather of other films like the allusion films created by directors like John Singleton and Spike Lee, creating a space for conversations about race and gender. Charles Burnett became a part of that dialogue with his film *Killer of Sheep*. Manhood, and blackness, play a central role in this film, yet below the surface the inattentiveness to the story of the female characters tells a tale of its own in this revolutionary film. The first important element of the film is the construction of manhood, or

rather the traversing from childhood to an immediate state of manhood without an in-between. In Stan's world, manhood has been defined by violence; examples are the yelling at and slapping of a young boy who does not participate in a fight involving his brother and the two men who believe that it is acceptable to murder for pride. Stan is unlike these men and more like the state of the boy who did not fight, leaving him in a state of childhood socially and perhaps placing his wife in a more maternal position than a reciprocal marriage would. The main character's vulnerability and humanity is masterfully portrayed against a backdrop of hopelessness, and it is clearly the authentic story of a man's life. Stan's wife is the person who argues and dismisses the would-be murderers from her stoop, and she argues not only for the life and integrity of her man, but for that of all black men. In many ways the men of this film constantly struggle with the ideals of manhood, shown with simple adult actions like having and keeping a spare tire in the trunk of a car before going on a road trip or cashing their own paychecks without sexually subordinating themselves to a (white) woman.

Ultimately, it must be acknowledged that men are provided a space in *Killer of Sheep* in which to explore their emotions openly, and this space contrasts with the space to which women are confined (female sorrow is personal, and only succumbed to in the absence of males). As I have demonstrated, the film brings together many instances of dueling gender dynamics and relationships with intimacy. The film situates black manhood on a liminal plane, establishing the characterization of black men and boys as one in progress yet still stifled in the roles of the past. The film's treatment of black women, however, presents only a traditionally stifling platform and presence which does not seek to progress beyond the limited gaze of socially acceptable and imposed ideals of what it means to be a black woman in America. *Killer of Sheep* remolds the

long-held assumptions held about black men created both by the Hollywood that survived without admitting blacks into film and the exploitative black film genre. While the film is praised for revolutionizing the way black people are viewed in film it presents a level of reality that is only congruent with black manhood, removing progress from the reality of how black women are presented. The film neatly inserts itself into conversations about social issues; however, those conversations necessarily exclude black women because unlike black men, black women are not presented with any evolution beyond their long-held tropes. Thus their roles are not counted in the packaging of revolution.

The role of domesticated black women has not changed much since Burnett's era, which is evidenced in the continued marginalization and stereotypical personifications of black women through the nineties black film allusionism films featuring the effeminate and consoling Brandi from *Boyz N the Hood*, or Stella getting her groove back through the sexual dalliance of a young, exotic man (who is made a man through his experiences with her).

Charles Burnett's *Killer of Sheep* is an under-appreciated masterpiece that engaged and responded to the popular Blaxploitation films of the 1970s. Perhaps the pseudo-realistic, rather than fantastic, depiction of Watts and its residents that stood in such stark contrast to the settings of Blaxploitation films led to *Killer of Sheep*'s limited reception, or perhaps it was the reasonably realistic depictions of black men and women who were simply trying to live, rather than (more sensationally) whoring, selling drugs, and fighting against a white person of power. While Burnett elegantly portrayed Stan's life, responding to the vitriolic undercurrent of Blaxploitation films, showing that Stan was human, hardworking, feeling, and someone who dreamt of more, his treatment of women is far less admirable. That is not to suggest that this was intentional or

malicious; rather, perhaps it offers room for conversation, such as this, and a space to question whether Burnett's depiction of women was fair, realistic, and underneath it all, perhaps an accurate representation of society's overall treatment of black women in America.

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Publication

“*Passages to America: Maya Engaged Classroom*”

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<http://mayanetwork.org/engaging-maya-graduate-course>. (accessed May 5, 2014).

Invited Talks

Featured panelist for the “*Love Your Body Campaign*” at the Gender and Women’s Studies program.
Kennesaw State University, October 18th, 2011.

Speaker and Co-facilitator (alongside Dr. Laura Davis) of the discussion of women in the military and the screening of *Service: When Women Come Marching Home* as a part of the Gender and Women’s Studies Focus Week 2014, Kennesaw State University, March 23, 2014.

Conference Presentations

Presentation at the 6th annual African and African Diaspora Studies student research and engagement conference. New Directions in Civil Rights Movement History Panel. “*African American Veterans & the Oppressive Impetuses for Civil Rights After WWII Through the Comparative Lens of Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man*”. Kennesaw State University, March 20, 2014.

Media Contributions

Commissioned designer, and primary IT webmaster of the International Maya Interpreter's Network website <http://mayanetwork.org/>.

Internships

Internship, Maya Heritage Community Network under the supervision of Dr. Alan LeBaron. Summer 2013.

Honors and Awards

President's List, Kennesaw State University Fall 2009

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Word, Power Point, Adobe Photoshop, Macromedia products, Proficient in SPSS, SPSSX and SAS statistical programs, Excel, Windows 8, Mac OSX, HTML coding, Web design, Internet security assurance, Adobe bridge CS4. On a more advanced note, I am capable of performing the set up and tuning of radio equipment including antennas and power sources; establishing contact with distant stations; processing and logging of messages; making changes to frequencies or cryptographic codes; and maintaining equipment at the first echelon. I have also been through significant training of many types of radar, satellite and human-motor/ military installations of prc-104 and prc-19 radios into various military modes of transportation.